Unravelling Anita Brookner's *Leaving Home*

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Anita Brookner (1928 -) is a contemporary British novelist and French Romantic art historian known to write novels which explore moral, social, and gender issues similarly to her great influences Henry James and Edith Wharton. Her narratology exhaustively and less decisively analyzes humanity's limited comprehension and consciousness. It reflects an uncertain postmodern world about lonely, single women. Born in London on 16 July 1928, she is educated at James Allen's Girls' School. She is born and brought up in a large Victorian villa in Herne Hill in South London. Brookner, one of the prominent novelists, unravels *Leaving Home* using a volcanic imagery. As lava erupts from a volcano, a name erupts from the past in a peaceful night, from the third person narrator, Emma Roberts who assures her position to be the protagonist of this work of art. Hence the eruption of her psyche could be expected in the novel. Literary master Brookner's elegant style is manifest on every page of her brilliant novel beautifully crafted and emotionally evocative. Caryn James says that Brookner's novels generally depict a solitary, intelligent and elegant heroine, ironic and privileged, who attempts to reconcile her experience of the world with her expectations. A small number of her novels feature male protagonists, although gender indicators do not substantially alter character or plot in Brookner's fiction. The Brooknerine male or female often displays forms of ennui, a broad capacity for self-reflection and, as walking-protagonists; they inevitably guide readers through the streets of inner-city London. The novels are set primarily in contemporary Britain, although trips to the continent are often imagined if not actualised. At times, the Brooknerine's knowledge of nineteenth-century art and literature informs a misreading of context, but also underwrites a complex narrative voice. Significantly, references to nineteenth-century textual and aesthetic production produce a nineteenth-century effect in Brookner's fiction and denote an archive of inter - textual source material in the Brookner text.

The protagonist is an eight-year old child when the names and presence of her respectable widowed mother's friends cheered her as they bring candies to her. Solitude seems to be the natural state in their residence. Brookner's prose style sounds more than elegant and precise; it sounds right. The novelist is so conscious to use the word 'respectable widow' in order to express the status of the widow. About her mom she adds a sentence in comparison with the family women in general. "Women wore their husbands much as they wore their pearl necklaces, or indeed their fur coats. The shame that attached to unmarried women was indelible, and my mother seemed to bear something of that imprint although she was a respectable widow" (1). A precise character study is formulated in these lines as there is a necessity to illuminate her mom's moral behaviour which forms the crux of her decency "I see …my mother ...whose beauty was undermined by an innocence that never left her. She longed for an ideal life which would not betray her… and survived widowhood almost as a return to her natural state. I never knew a woman so inactive, her days reserved for reading and thinking" (2, 3).

The protagonist reminiscences till this character study and then her current state of living alone is revealed, as her mother has passed away leaving her to live alone. The psychological study of her widowed mom and her mental status along with the views on self, surprise the readers who open the novel to unearth the psycho-cultural space of the protagonist. Her own personal dilemma is an enigma to herself and so she propounds her psychological concept

> I had been fearful of leaving home in case something should happen to her. Yet leaving home had become a necessity, although a painful one, if ever I were to find freedom. The unconscious had a complete network installed: I had only to be patient and all would be revealed. I tried to work out the significance of what my abrupt awakening had tried to tell me. (3)

Emma leaves home to study garden design. With Emma Roberts, the heroine of *Leaving Home*, Brookner may finally have gone too far. According to Caryn James, in many ways, Emma is a typical Brookner character: bookish, meek, all but devoid of sexual passion. But she also displays a wide streak of self-pity that makes it difficult for a reader to like her nearly as much as Brookner does. Apparently longing for the orderly rules of a Jane Austen world, Brookner allows her characters to behave as if one still existed. Too clever not to see the absurdity of this, she often tries to get around it by situating her heroines at a transitory moment in recent feminism, when clinging to old social rules was just barely possible. Here that ploy seems desperate as Emma, the self-deluded narrator, looks back at the late 1970's from the myopic distance of the early-to-mid-1980s. Emma so loves order that she is writing a dissertation on classical garden design, a project that keeps her shuttling between London and Paris. In London, her sickly mother is one of Brookner's nuns like widows, a woman so self-effacing that she drops dead one day in Selfridges, considerately sparing her daughter the years of nursing they could both see ahead. Emma fears turning into her sad, solitary mother, but we know from the start that she already has.

She lives in a student hostel with students all over the world. The room does not appear to be attractive. Her friends are always lovable, but she could not move freely with them as she does not want to be there forever. She visits gardens and parks in France. She feels as if there is no need to think of going home. She wants to have an ideal house of her own. With the benefactor's funds she goes to France studying plans for ideal gardens of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of Fouquet. The classical code of reticence, sobriety and order seems to be apparent in those gardens.

> I was in search of a certain symmetry, a place of excellence that I should recognize and somehow make my own. I had no way of attaining this condition myself, but I felt that here was a concept that inspired a standard of behaviour far removed from the tame and unambitious customs that were my true inheritance. The design of classical

> garden was an objective correlative, but a thoroughly acceptable one. It was out there, but it also corresponded to a disposition that I hoped to develop. (6-7)

Her mother's love is revealed through the act of being calm and accepting the prospect with equanimity while she is unaware of garden designing when Emma leaves her mom to her fate, even though it seems hazardous. Emma's future appears to be a bleak one without any plan or prominent decision. A new female character has been brought to the front as a Librarian named, Francoise. She works along with one M. Bonfils, a monastic quiet Librarian. She is just the opposite of him. She is a talkative and friend to one and all. She admired Emma's reticence and dropped a note on her open pages to meet for Coffee and a Sandwich at midday in one of the Cafes she favoured. Her assent has been wordless. M. Bonfils appears to be frightened of her vitality. He seems to have peace with her disruptive presence.

Francoise has been picturized as a striking woman with Bohemian and Gallic features, not beautiful but electric. She has several boyfriends and spends most of her time with them, whereas Emma does not allow any. London resembles to be serene. Many of Emma's friends behave like strangers as the English are normally like that. Emma comes home to revive her mother into the world of happiness and satisfaction through her presence. They go for shopping and sit together for lunch as well as tea. In this critical juncture, Brookner brings in the first male character, Robert Moore. He is the only bachelor brother of Emma's mother. He supports the family with his father's investments. She is reticent as she has lost her dad at the age of three, so she has no memory of him. Therefore she is unaware of his worth. According to her he has failed in the duty of taking care of her mother. At the same time she is also determined not to occupy that position. This is the genuine reason for her decision to leave home. She, herself knows that Garden Design is at the furthest choice removed from a sensible life plan. Her acceptance to her fate is rather a curiosity than enthusiasm. She has designed to force herself into it in order to escape from melancholy, rumination, solitude and anomalous world of her mother. The revelation of the facts gradually makes it possible to think of desolated, grave life that has welcomed the protagonist towards itself. She unfolds the life in a quasi-college complex as a symbol of her Self. It also seems to be a blind alley filled with void. Her studies and profession provide sustenance for her physical world, without which she might be in an embalmed condition yet alive to be a mystery. She finds no places of entertainment anywhere around her room. Her involvement in the studies in the long run expels her dull and drowsy habits as well as her traits. She concludes as, "my work, my disguise, consoled me for what I obliged to forgo: love, friendship, warmth, familiarity" (13).

Emma is glad at last to befriend a Librarian. Emma admired Francoise's mobile features, as Caryn James says that splendid figure and her face alighted with humour, a sexy librarian who has her own problems with Maman. Françoise is destined to enter an arranged marriage so that her impoverished family can keep their country house. Meanwhile, she is, Emma says that, one of those women who had been liberated into behaving like men, a peculiar judgment from a woman in her twenties. In those days, Emma flirts between the two cities easily, complaining all the while that she is inept at making her way in the world. The heroine of *Leaving Home* is always leaving; she can neither settle in one place nor relish the joys of her rootless life, which seems improper to her. Although her name evokes Austen's matchmaking Emma Woodhouse and Flaubert's adulterous Emma Bovary, any echoes are ironic. This Emma resembles those Henry James' characters that are destined to observe life from a distance. Her talk about her mother reminds Emma to think of her lonely mother. Francoise's views on marriage are very simple. She loves to be with a good and compassionate hubby till she lives. She sympathizes Emma as the latter does not have any boyfriends to while away her time.

At France Francoise suggests a cheaper hotel to Emma as she has settled in the same. After this settlement, a new young and youthful novelist and poet, Michael, but an incarnation of reticence enters into the feminine world of Emma. This youth comes within the minor change, but his influence is prominent in her. He is observing a sort of respite that cautious people allow themselves before returning to the duties assigned to them by others. He is a shy, taciturn man or rather a boy older than Emma as he lives in the next room to her. Like most of the friendless people he appears to be awkward with friendship, yet he could not be in any way being disqualified from closer ties. He looks as if; he is a misfit with poetic looks, fine bony face and careless lock of hair. He seems to know French and English thoroughly. Therefore he works as a Translator to businessmen. Emma has no other way than to befriend him. Both of them walked together for long hours but he does not chat much since he is very gentle and calm like her. Both of them are celibate and they belong to the same category of behaviour as distant members of a family. Emma loves and marvels at his belated courtesies. Francoise is always adulterous with lovers but she invites Emma to her home for a weekend and it has been agreed to do so. Francoise wants Emma to find a suitable man to marry and live with him. Emma hates men similar to her uncle in their habits so she prefers Michael to her uncle:

> I preferred Michael and his blessed silences to the overt masculinity exuded by my uncle, who I saw, had something of the same attitude as Francoise…I was unawakened, asexual: therefore I might… find an occupation for myself by attending to my mother whom he saw as lacking in protection. (35)

Emma receives peace from Michael. She values and respects him, respects his separateness. "Our gift to each other was simple companionship, wordless acceptance" (36). Without his company she must have been not only lonely but purposeless. She derives pleasure from the presence at my side of my so undemanding companion as he too values her presence. She is alive to Francoise and her friendship for her, but Michael is more than a friend. He is her brother and knows that they have to spend the evening going around bookshops, reading a few pages each. Therefore she longs for his knock on her door. Brookner uses several French terms and phrases in her novel whenever she gets a chance to point out specific names and terms of France. Emma is captivated by the house of Francoise, L'Ermitage.

Brookner uses the technique of dreams in very rare occasions. Emma's dreams are far more vivid than her life, and that can be excruciatingly sad. One night, she says, "I had a dream of bliss so rare that I knew it was unconnected to anything I had ever experienced".She has simply dreamt that "I was loved". Yet Emma's whining tone undermines sympathy. She often proclaims that she wants other people to make her life's choices for her; yet when friends try to help her. Whereas she whimpers, "I would end up doing what others wanted me to do". In poor-me mode, she lists the things "I was obliged to forego: love, friendship, warmth, familiarity". She contrasts Françoise's willfulness with her own submissive nature and says, "It takes a kind of genius to save one's own life" (51-52). Well, no, it doesn't. Ordinary people do it every day; ordinary women did it in the 1970s.

As Michele Hewitson says, Brookner's women certainly are of a type: outsiders who are close to their mothers, circumscribed by a strong familial devotion, egregiously introspective. But they are very real even if they do not fit into a post feminist mold, and Brookner plumbs their thoughts and feelings and isolation to a depth no other living writer does. When Brookner arrived in the early 1980's, she seems like the kid sister of Penelope Fitzgerald or Barbara Pym, those fine, late-blooming British authors (Brookner is 52 when her first novel appeared) known for quaintly charming novels of manners. But now a musty smell wafts from each new Brookner book, a stale whiff that arises partly because she has tweaked the same novel 23 times in 24 years, and largely because her shrinking-violet heroines live in a hermetic, increasingly unconvincing world. It's a place detached from time, where even bright young women act like little old ladies.

According to Michele Hewitson, Brookner is the most intrepid contemporary explorer of this terrain. In the twenty-one novels she has written over the past twenty-one years, she has created a distinctive world, a world of widows and widowers, of the divorced and the never-married lonely people who yearn for connection with others at the same time as they cautiously guard their privacy. If one looks at the descriptions on her book jackets, one might conclude that her range is narrow. Yet Brookner, who won a Booker Prize in 1984 for *Hotel du Lac*, inhabits her main characters so persuasively, commits her imagination so thoroughly in each novel, that almost every time she returns to her territory, the results are powerful and fresh. Brookner's fluid, descriptive writing and striking ability to render delicately wrought portraits of ordinary, lonely people struggling to reconcile themselves to their failures in life has led critics to compare her to Henry James, Jane Austen, and George Eliot. She is widely respected for her convincing characterizations and talent for visual description. Critics praise her ability to portray complex psychological motivations in simple, eloquent language. Brookner's affinity for depicting socially repressed women in her works has also prompted commentators to compare her novels to the fiction of Margaret Drabble, Barbara Pym, and Virginia Woolf. Though criticized by some feminists for her female characters' desire to fit into patriarchal social roles, others commend Brookner for examining the difficulties faced by educated women who attempt to assimilate such conventions. Reviewers frequently note the narrow range of Brookner's composition.

While some praise her distinctly circumscribed exploration of loneliness, sexuality, human isolation, and depression, others accuse her of hiding a lack of originality by rewriting a thinly veiled autobiographical story over and over. In addition, some reviewers consider her characters depressing and humourless and object to her disheartening view of human nature and inverted moral code. Brookner's talent for description; however, some find fault in her tendency to tell, not to show by writing her story in expository prose with little dialogue instead of letting her characters and events tell the story themselves. Despite such criticisms, Brookner is widely regarded as a talented stylist whose shrewd depiction of certain middle-class, middle-aged women represents a significant contribution to contemporary literature.

One has to grant Emma her nature, but it's impossible to make the case that her contradictions are all intentional, because the distance between her and Brookner often wavers and eventually disappears. Dreams play a prominent role in the world of Post modernism:

> The happiness of the dream although entirely human for I knew it did not pertain to the hereafter was –arbitrary. One might or might not encounter it, but only as a gift, whether or not it was ever to be repeated. It seemed that even this was unlikely. Beautiful as the feeling had been, its only effect was to expose a condition of longing, and the knowledge that it must be sought, but also that it might not be found. (53)

As Emma is alone, she has a lovely dream, but she could not remember anything accurately. What she remembers is that she has been loved. She could not hope for "a dream as radiant as the strange dream which had seemed to me so significant" (61). The significance of the dream proves to be elusive and fallacious to her, since it has to do with the hope of the promise of fulfillment. The luxury of sleep seems to deny her. Hence whenever she closes her eyes she is not relieved. Instead she feels a sensation of falling, and the threat of fear from which there is no possible release to her. She becomes sad when Michael does not wait for her on his Sunday walk, but roams around gardens and comes at last to her room to give a note, which tells her that her mother is ill. At once she telephones her uncle, Robert Moore who is in tears as he informs of her mother's fatal accident. Michael gives his jacket and checks whether she has enough money to buy a plane ticket. They reach the airport when he asks whether he should escort her or not. Emma declines the bid and reaches her mother's flat in London. Her uncle cries a lot as he is a bachelor with none to him except his sister. He gives her a milk bottle and leaves.

Emma decides to write letters to Francoise and Michael thanking the latter and informing the former. She experiences the awful loneliness for a while and then after a few days she comes to France. Francoise is shocked and taken aback to see her. She meets one Dr. Philip Hudson. He intends to drop Emma at house, but he has not come in a car. So they walk till they find a cab and he leaves after sending her. Emma tells him that she is writing a book. He invites for a lunch to which she agrees to come. She hates her own flat after watching the bright lights of Sarah. She feels as "I was lost among strangers whom I could never please. Here was exile, but perhaps reality, a reality with which I should have to come to terms" (82). As per the words of Caryn James, Brookner bluntly announces the connection when a potential love interest - an older man named Philip, with whom Emma is merely contented - quotes to her from *The Ambassadors*, that classic of the unlived life. "Live all you can, as Henry James said," Philip tells her. Like James's middle-aged men, Emma is constitutionally unable to do this, and goes on living as little as possible. She has a sort-of boyfriend in Paris, with whom she takes for fraternal walks on Sunday afternoons. After an initial exchange their relationship has been platonic, even celibate, is how Emma informs the reader that they have sex just once. No wonder if it is a bad embarrassment. Brookner can still do what she has always done best: writes beautiful, piercingly elegant observations. *Leaving Home* starts with Emma dreaming colourfully of her uncommunicative mother's old friends, remembered from a child's perspective that Dolly Edwards had "very red lips and a fur coat" (1).

Her forlorn life makes to reveals her mind through her views on homesickness in her compared with others. Her homesickness is a way of life that is no longer sustainable as she has been condemned to adulthood, since nothing could have prevented it. Whereas the unemployable students whom she has met in Paris are so poetic in their artist's garb. They are so accessible in their liberal attitude to time and space. She envies them as they have no trace of homesickness in them. Robert Moore's letter tells her that he has been exasperated by her letter and her mother's income will come to her. If she needs any advice, she can meet him at his flat Emma buys new household things with her mother's money as she has moved to a new house but she is sad as she could not imagine her life in this flat, alone with no one else. She compares the students in France with the dull Philip Hudson. Though she is free, she is frightened by the permanence in this flat. She watches traffic through her window. Wakefulness does not disturb her, but sleep disturbs her a lot. Emma began to feel that she can exercise her will only over her book. Her fate is photographed in these inevitable sentences which unlocks the heart of the matter:

> I perceived the beauty of study itself, the process rather than the result, and once I put down my pen I felt regret, as though abandoning a friendship. The rest of the day seemed improvised, and it was sometimes difficult to find a reason to do anything else…my work was the only area of my life in which I could exercise my own will. This may be the reward for those who undertake such a solitary occupation. (124, 125)

She receives a letter from Francoise inviting her for a grand party and a car will be provided to her, if she wishes to do so, accompanied by a familiar family. At the party she is glad to see some friendly familiar faces and leaves along with them. She wanders as many gardens as possible as she sits in usual Cafes remembering the unhappy behaviour of the English men in London. All on a sudden she notices someone like Michael but when he turned his face, it is someone else. In the dinner party given by Francoise's mother, a huge gathering has been seen. Emma chats with all whom she knows or has already seen in the previous parties there. Jean Charles stares at Emma. Mme Mercier shares the history of her life along with the life of Francoise's mother. Mme Mercier's husband's death has made her poor, which is why she is not able to get proper recognition in the party. Yet she does not seem to be sad, but is happy to attend the party whole-heartedly. Emma felt as if she watches a performance. She remembers Francoise's American Lover and travels back to London by train.

The train is filled with people reading the Sunday papers, the scene is recognizably English. The man sitting beside her kindly handed her the Telegraph, a newspaper as she is without any. When they reach Waterloo he retrieves his possessions and says "you are travelling light then, 'oh , yes' I replied. 'I go back and forth a lot. I shall in back in Paris very soon'" (143). Even though, she has made this statement, it seems a far cloudier prospect now than it had been in the past. Similar to the apostle Paul in the Holy Bible who says that he is doing the evil which he has decided not to do since what is inherent in him is exhibited in his actions (The Holy Bible :The Epistle of Romans 7:17-20) . The same formula is being at work within Emma. Though she is not willing to meet Francoise, her inbuilt thoughts love

Francoise who does not keep in touch with Emma and she is not surprised as she has heard from Mme Mercier that it is always an expected one with regard to this family.

After such visits she has been newly reconciled to her small flat. She and Philip Hudson are careful with each other. There are no intemperate outbursts in her part and no more self- interested reserve on his. They have discovered an affinity that has not been there before. They are content with this for a time being. Emma feels that there might be a few changes in future. She has finished her book. It has to go for typing. As she has completed the book, there is nothing to do now, hence Philip Hudson advises her to go for another degree in Garden Design and then she can set up as an individual consultant in landscape Gardening. Her mind is at peace now without any ambiguity about her future:

> I am more or less comfortable, more or less contented. Not everyone is born to fulfil an heroic role. The only realistic ambition is to live in the present. And sometimes … this is more than enough to keep one busy. Time, which was squandered, must now be given over to the actual, the possible, and perhaps to that evanescent hope of a good outcome which never deserts one, and which should never be abandoned. (168)

As Catherine Lockerbie has proclaimed, If Brookner didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent her. In a raucous, rapidly changing world, beset by nameless dangers and bad manners, it is imperative that there remain a still, calm center of certainty and impeccable etiquette. Each year brings forth a new Brookner novel, with the regularity of a ticking metronome atop a dusty piano in a dark London room. Each novel brings us back to that same dark room: to the stuffed furniture of another age, the polite repression of the protagonist, the moral codes of yesteryear.

To Michele Hewitson, it is all immensely reassuring, in a rather dismal manner. The Brookner universe is closed and complete, not susceptible, it seems, to the ravages of outside incident or the menaces of modernity. Here melancholy women step carefully through sad lives filled with small and inevitable disappointments. In this subdued world of circumscribed Englishness, the values and vocabulary of another era pepper the long pages of introspection, honoring concepts like obligation, penance and propriety. Readers seeking spontaneity, magic, vigor, may wish to run rapidly, screaming, in the opposite direction. Yet all this elegant restraint weaves its own insistent spell.

Brookner's spiritual and syntactic masters are Jane Austen and Henry James. Brookner's novel is not a simple variation on old themes. It recombines many of Brookner's special ingredients as when cautious Emma Roberts goes to France to carry out research into seventeenth-century garden design, she finds a reliable diversion from her studies in her unlikely new friend Francoise Desnoyers, in whose beautiful house she is a welcomed as a guest. However, she is not too dazzled to ignore the tensions that exist between Francoise and her formidable mother or between Mme Desnoyners and her other guests. London recedes into the background as life in France becomes more significant in every respect, it is not until the horrifying episode that puts an end to this fascination that Emma is reconciled to her duller but safer life at house and to the compromises that she comes to accept. Brookner has culminated the novel in a quasi –optimistic note with a hidden pessimistic life of the protagonist. This work of art is praiseworthy for its evolution of thought. The Editor of

Independent Magazine, Michele Roberts has aptly uttered that nobody else will ever write like Brookner.

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