Identity In-between. Liminality and Related Narrative Techniques in Selected Novels by Anita Brookner.

Summary

Anita Brookner (1928 – 2016) was a renowned art historian and a novelist. Determinism, complicated family dynamics, and social maladjustment constitute the central themes of Brookner's fiction. The writer meditates on the predetermined fate of her protagonists who are unable to escape the limitations imposed by their childhood devoid of parental guidance and stability. With each novel, Brookner tells a similar story about the hardships and loneliness of characters whose ethnically hybrid families set them apart from the mainstream English culture. Thus, Brooknerine is an exemplification of both the feeling of exclusion from and the attempt to fit into English society. Despite differences in plots, *A Start in Life* [*SL*] , *Providence* [*P*], *Look at Me* [*LM*], *Hotel du Lac* [*HL*], and *Family and Friends* [*FF*] all feature these recurring themes, thus typifying Brookner's interest but also making this set of novels somewhat uniform analytical material as regards the research aims of this thesis.

The aim of the present study is to investigate the liminal identity of the protagonists of Brookner's first five novels, *SL*, *P*, *LM*, *HL*, and *FF*, in order to explore this facet of Brooknerian research that appears to lack in scrutiny. This objective provokes further research questions concerning the aspects of the protagonists' existence, which contribute most to the transitory status of these characters. Consequently, the identification of such aspects helps to expose the mechanics of narrative representation of female characters' self-identification. In particular, attention is given to the narrative techniques which are employed to construct the in-between characters in *SL*, *P*, *LM*, *HL*, and *FF*.

Considering the selection of novels to be discussed and the research goals of the thesis, namely the liminal position of the aforementioned protagonists and relevant narrative techniques, the present dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first one presents the basic concepts related to liminality and methodological background which are essential for the analyses of liminality in the literary texts. The second and third chapters are devoted to practical considerations. The closing part offers findings related to liminal identities in the discussed novels.

Chapter 1 provides some historical context of the ideas offered by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, two most important figures in the context of liminality. The chapter describes the structure of the rites of passage and the attributes of liminality. Moreover, it also presents some structuralists methodology of literary analysis of narrative techniques relating to

space and time as well as a discussion of post-modern, discursive notions of identity. The traditional structuralist devices are then employed in the following chapters to identify certain qualities, motifs, and categories (for example, the emerging division of space in the novels) by identifying their semantic fields. The post-modern theories connected to discourse and identity are further used to interpret the function and meaning of these categories to reveal the mechanics of self-identification of the characters.

The analytical part is composed of two chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on the analysis of the protagonists' liminality connected to their complicated ethnic ancestry. Section 2.1 examines the way the family houses represent the feeling of displacement of the characters. Next, section 2.2 discusses the motif of expulsion and exile. The final section of this chapter, 2.3, considers the issue of otherness. This section is further subdivided into the part devoted to Darwinian narrative and Holocaust tropes, and the part dedicated to duality, translation, and dehumanization.

Chapter 3 discusses liminality in the private and romantic spheres of the protagonists' lives. Similarly to the previous chapter, it is divided into three sections. Section 3.1 addresses the characters' suspended position between childhood and adulthood, the state which results from the complicated family dynamics. The next section, 3.2, looks at the motif of waiting as at liminal condition and reveals how it influences the action of the novels. Finally, section 3.3 aims at discerning the elements of traditional rites of passage in the discussed novels. The role of these rituals is examined in relation to the protagonists' personal hopes and expectations.

The dissertation finishes with conclusions concerning the emerging dynamics of identity construction in the first five novels by Brookner. It demonstrates how liminality regarding different aspects of the protagonists' existence reveals itself on the narrative level of the discussed novels. The conclusion stemming from the analyses is that ethnic liminality is inseparable from other aspects of protagonists' lives. The study of the ethnic and private liminalities in Brookner's prose demonstrates that such a clear-cut division could only be adopted for the analytical purposes. Since ethnic liminality is linked to the childhood of the protagonists, they become shaped by duality of traditions and cultures. Their ascription to any membership category is suspended because they feel neither sufficiently Jewish nor English. This transitory status translates to every other aspect of their lives. That is why the inability to enter the adult life has the undertones of ethnic otherness for the protagonists of *SL*, *P*, *LM*, and *HL*.

It is also safe to conclude that the liminal transition in Brookner's novels does not constitute the transition to a stable, accepted, and grounded identity. What the transitory time

provides is not the ultimate access to the acceptance and inclusion in English society but a deeper understanding and acknowledgement of their liminal position within this society. The liminal transitions of Brooknerian protagonists definitely operate through disillusionment. Brookner does not provide easy consolations for her main characters. Instead, she paints a more sombre picture of experience of individuals who realize that liminality is not only a transitional phase for them but their destiny. However, although the protagonists do not achieve incorporation into desired English stratum, they do seem to gain some knowledge of who they are, what limitations they have, and how wrongly they perceived reality.

Key words: Anita Brookner, liminality, narrative techniques, identity, Anglo-Jewish identity, rite of passage, postmemory, the Holocaust tropes, Darwinian narrative, otherness, exile