

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HUMAN GAZE IN ANITA BROOKNER'S *LOOK AT ME*

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As the title of the novel indicates, the act of writing her story is primarily motivated by the narrator Frances Hinton's narcissistic desire for recognition. Despite the fact that *Look at Me* is the story of a fictional character and not an autobiography, Mark Freeman's characterization of the features of autobiography serves as a means of understanding Frances's story. Mark Freeman argues that: "Memory... which often has to do not merely with recounting the past, but with making sense of it... is an interpretive act the end of which is an enlarged understanding of the self."¹ Frances's narrative, on the other hand, is characterized by a complete lack of an understanding of herself and therefore displays, instead of a psychic development, a cyclic pattern that renders the impression that Frances's story is the repetition of the time of which she never speaks, as she tells the reader on various occasions. The cyclic pattern, however, becomes most explicit at the end of the novel where Frances' lack of an understanding of herself points at a future victimization due to the fact that Frances refuses to step out of her assumed passivity. The necessity to take up an active role in writing is emphasized by Nancy A. Walker who claims that:

The act of writing autobiography constitutes a re-visioning of the self for presentation to the public. For the woman writer, such an act involves the transformation of the self from object to subject – from player in someone else's narrative to center of her own.²

Although Frances puts herself into the centre of her narrative, she fails in taking up an active role and criticising her environment through the pen. Instead

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¹ Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*, p.29.

² Nancy A. Walker, *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition*, p.175.

she adopts the typically passive female role and portrays herself as a helpless victim.

What most characters in Frances' story have in common is the narcissistic need to be seen and recognized by others. Jeffrey Berman points out that narcissism is closely linked to the "search for maternal mirroring and confirmation from external objects."³ The link between writing and lost maternal love in the novel becomes most obvious in Frances's description of her parents, for Frances tells the reader that her parents were very weak and fearful persons, easily hurt by their social surrounding and this reveals their lack of an established sense of identity. She reports that her father devoted all his spare time to his wife and she remembers her mother looking out of the window, waiting for her husband to return home. Frances' witnessing her mother at the window, however, implies that her mother turned her back to her daughter, excluding her from her gaze. It is also significant that she describes her father's endeavour to devote his spare time not to his family, but to her mother only and the preoccupation of her parents with each other naturally led to Frances' sense of isolation. The grown-up Frances has thus been turned into a character who is in search of an object with which to identify and which, in turn, recognizes and looks at her. However, although her greatest desire is to be looked at and recognized by others, she is never able to actively attract the attention of others, for she has been conditioned to be silent by her parents for too long.

Frances may have been easily overlooked by her mother, but she has created a device for calling her mother's attention and this is her writing, for reading her stories to her mother she ensured that her mother approvingly looks at her.

Writing, however, does not occupy a central space in her life as it does not provide her with a complete sense of validation. In order to feel complete and a person of value, she is in need of a male partner. Significantly her story is only written down when she loses the hope of a relationship with James Anstey. Losing him, she turns back to her writing and, being an orphan by now, she turns the reader into a mother figure and presents herself as a helpless and victimized child.

At the beginning of her narrative Frances states that her greatest fear is to remain lonely forever and one day become a spinster which indicates that she

³ Jeffrey Berman, *Narcissism and the Novel*, p.6.

regards a relationship with a man as a guarantee for social recognition. Her behaviour thus reflects Lacan's notion of the interrelation between the individual and society which acts as a parental figure. Lacan's claim that the Oedipal crisis lies "at the origin of the whole process of the cultural subordination of man"⁴ explains Frances' endeavour who, as a female, plays the obedient daughter whereby she hopes to be endowed with the feeling of being recognized and valued.

Being a single woman, Frances Hinton does not regard herself as a recognized and socially valued subject and as Ann Fisher-Wirth claims, this feature characterizes most of Anita Brookner's protagonists. She states that: "All of Brookner's heroines are defined by lack. They exist, by their own choice, almost entirely within the patriarchal structures - particularly the conventional heterosexual rituals of courtship and marriage."⁵

Frances' desire for a male partner, however, does not lead her to search for any suitable marital partner. If it were so, she would have married David long ago who, as she tells us, is always willing to marry her. Frances' lack of self-esteem leaves her dissatisfied with the attention of a single man, for she has been conditioned to behave 'respectable' which means that she largely adopts a passive role and represses any desire for self-exhibition. The act of attracting the attention of the social environment has therefore to be played by Frances' male partner and it is this feature that she requires in him. Her ideal partner would be the one who sees and recognizes her, but who at the same time is seen, recognized and admired by his surrounding. Through him Frances will share the looks he derives and thus feel compensated for the lack of attention she experienced during her childhood.

One such ideal, yet impossible, partner is the already married Nick. Although Frances congratulates herself "on not being in love with anyone"⁶ at the beginning of the novel, it is very striking how much time and how many pages she devotes to the description of Nick Fraser. Later on James Anstey becomes her partner, but it is significant that at the beginning of her narrative she completely dismisses him and instead focuses on her enthusiastic description of Nick. The first time she mentions the two men she writes: "The potential boredom of this routine is broken by the visits of one or other of the

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, p.24.

⁵ Ann Fisher-Wirth, *Hunger Art: The Novels of Anita Brookner*, p.2.

⁶ Anita Brookner, *Look at Me*, p.16.

Institute's own doctors, particularly one of the two whose research we are funding, James Anstey or Nick Fraser"⁷ and then she devotes five pages to the description of Nick. Only once more does she mention James: "I am not in love ... with James Anstey, even though he is tall and ferocious-looking and presentable and not married and undoubtedly what Mrs Halloran would call a bit of a handful,"⁸ but these are Mrs Halloran's words and do not reflect her own opinion.

Only when James is introduced to her as a partner through Nick and Alix does Frances describe him in greater detail, for only now, when he has gained importance in the eyes of her two friends, does he gain importance in Frances' eyes. Despite Frances' appreciative description of James, it becomes obvious that she constantly compares him to Nick who always gains the advantage over him. Frances notes: "He was attractive, in a way that did not attract me, and which in any case paled into insignificance beside Nick's smiling charm."⁹ Then she compares him as follows: "Without his coat on Dr Anstey was revealed to be wearing an equally tailored grey suit, a white shirt, and a severe blue tie, which threw Nick's pullover and open neck into the pleasantest possible relief."¹⁰

Nick exceedingly impresses her through his ability to attract attention without, as she thinks, actually doing anything. While Frances claims that Olivia is in love with Nick, it is, in fact, she herself who is in love with him. Olivia may be attracted to his handsome looks and his charm, but she succeeds in maintaining the appropriate distance in order to view him for what he really is. Unlike Frances, Olivia seems to be able to look through Nick and realize that he is putting on a show. When she calls him "our All-England hero"¹¹ her remark is obviously ironic, yet Frances fails to comprehend the irony, as she fails to comprehend most of Olivia's criticisms concerning Nick.

Contrary to Frances, Olivia has received the necessary attention from her parents which she needs in order to build up a healthy ego and therefore does not fall prey to Nick's charm. Due to her physical disability, Olivia would be expected to be more vulnerable to acts of self-depreciation, but until the time of

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.73

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.74

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.11

the accident which occurred at the age of sixteen, she has been able to establish a healthy sense of identity, for Olivia's parents admiringly look at their daughter and even overlook her physical disability because they focus on her beautiful face which implies that they look into her eyes in which she can see her image reflected back to her and thus create a sense of selfhood.

When Frances at the end of her friendship with Alix emphasizes that Olivia is crippled only physically she is right, for her remark, which she utters out of anger, implies that people like Alix are crippled mentally. Ironically Frances will never be able to come near this truth, for Alix is her alter ego and represents that which she would like to be, namely the wife of a successful and attractive man. The desire to be like Alix is very obvious in Frances' unwillingness to invite her friends to her home because she fears their derision. As Helga Kurz points out:

Her dislike for her flat and wish to decorate it more fashionably stand for her self-hatred and desire to be like Alix Fraser...She invites Alix to her home only once to receive her ruthless derision. Her subsequent fear of Alix's scorn, which really is a fear of being discovered as someone caught in emotional confusion, forces her to meet Alix outside her home in the future.¹²

Although Frances is more in love with Nick than with Alix, she is too well-behaved to admit passion towards an already married man. After she is invited to dinner, however, she can transfer her feelings for Nick onto both of them and thus state: "I fell in love with them both."¹³

What impresses her in Nick's and Alix's relationship is their constant gaze into each other's eyes. Alix thus symbolizes for her that which she has always dreamed of, namely to be looked at by a man and at the same time, through his attractiveness, attract the attention of a multitude of eyes. This is the main reason why she has never been attracted to James, for despite his resemblance to Nick he differs in one main point, namely in the ability to attract attention.

As Frances is a character who is easily impressed by individuals who attract attention, she is not able to maintain the necessary distance to objectively

¹² Helga Kurz, "The Impossibility of Female Friendship: A Study of Anita Brookner's Female Characters," p.16.

¹³ Anita Brookner, *Look at Me*, p.40.

view Alix and Nick when they enter the library for the first time together. Olivia clearly disapproves of their behaviour and actually refuses to look at them when she takes a pair of scissors and trims a photograph, holding it in such a way that it makes it impossible for her to see them, for she is aware that they perform a show and try to turn them into an audience. Frances, on the other hand, is ready to look at them without any criticism and that is the reason why she, and not Olivia, is invited by Alix to dinner, for Alix immediately realizes that Frances will represent the ideal audience for her.

Although Frances senses Alix's and Nick's motive for the invitation, she is mistaken about its extent. She knows that they need her as an audience and says: "I was there because some element in that perfect marriage was deficient."¹⁴ Frances is aware that she provides for something which is missing in their relationship, but she does not understand that their complete behaviour masks their true selves. She thinks that Nick and Alix are completely different from her, yet the fact is that at the core there is no difference between her and them. Their whole behaviour seems to say "Look at me". Alix's interrogation of strangers at the restaurant, for example, is an act of making people sitting next to them look at her.

It is also very significant how mistaken Frances is about the restaurant, for she thinks that it serves as a meeting place for a close circle of friends, but there is much to doubt about the closeness and sincerity of that friendship. It is very interesting that Frances never mentions any of those friends visiting Nick and Alix at home, for home means privacy and the lack of an audience. For the regulars the restaurant, in fact, becomes a stage on which they act and at the same time become each other's audience. Frances never realizes that those people actually perform a show. Frances, for instance, notes that Nick, Alix and Maria behave in a quite different manner when only few people turn up at the restaurant, but she is not able to interpret this phenomena correctly. She states:

Occasionally there would be a quiet night, when nobody much turned up, and I was surprised to note how the conversation languished. Maria would sit at our table, and she and Alix would exchange only desultory remarks, yawning from time to time.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.61.

Her friends' passivity is actually due to their lack of an audience. When the restaurant is full, the atmosphere changes:

But those quiet nights were quite outdistanced by the noisy ones, when the laughter rose and the faces became flushed and there was a marvellous feeling of masks being cast aside and politeness abandoned.¹⁶

Where Frances is mistaken is the fact that her friends are actually wearing masks which she does not realize. She thinks that Alix and her friends reveal their true selves at the restaurant, but instead they all play roles in order to attract attention. It is very interesting that although Frances knows about Alix' fear of loneliness, she is never aware that Alix suffers from the same fear as she herself. When Nick tells Frances that Alix sometimes gets "rather depressed,"¹⁷ Frances mistakes Alix' depression for mere boredom, because Alix covers her fear of loneliness by pretending that the only thing she needs is entertainment and unfortunately Frances believes her. She does not recognize that Alix cannot bear to be alone, that she constantly needs a person who looks at her, because Alix performs the role of a successful woman quite well. Frances' description of Alix' character is very contradictory, yet she is not aware of it, for she regards Alix as a perfect unity who is in accord with her true self and therefore wears no social mask. Alix, however, performs a social role like everybody and, in her case, she plays the wife of a successful doctor. Frances says:

I suppose it is rather dull being a doctor's wife in London after all that, but the amazing thing is that she really takes an interest in Nick's work and is always willing to help. I think that is marvellous of her, spending so much of her time with people who are unfit or depressed, and cheering them up.¹⁸

Some time later Frances states that Alix is actually fed up with Nick's work¹⁹ and regards his depressed patients even with contempt.²⁰ Frances is not aware of the contradiction in her statements, for she identifies with Alix, who is her ideal self, to such an extent that she adopts her point of view without criticism.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.61

¹⁷ Ibid., p.67.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.33.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.52.

²⁰ Ibid., p.56.

Frances also misinterprets Nick's behaviour whom she perceives as a mainly passive character in the restaurant. She states: "Nick never said much, after his initial greeting of Maria,"²¹ but she does not know the reason for his silence and does not even contemplate on it, because she falls prey to Nick's usual performance at the library. She is completely wrong when she thinks that Nick and Alix are actually in no need of other people and are essentially sufficient to themselves. About Nick she says:

He seemed to prepare an atmosphere of affection for himself, yet I think we all felt that this was his natural climate. He was born to it...

We assumed that this diapason of love had followed him from home, that it had always been his natural element, that he had never lacked for it. If he used endearments it was because he had always heard them used towards himself.²²

Frances is not aware that Nick creates an artificial aura around himself and that his behaviour actually hints at a person who must not have been used to much attention and love. Otherwise he would not behave in such an exhibitionist way. Frances observes a certain restlessness about him and attributes it to his sexuality, although it is more probable that it is the result of his need for recognition which he, like Frances, lacked during childhood. Remaining incomprehensive of Nick's need, Frances never understands the true nature of the visits to the library which serve as a means for his self-gratification. She describes his visits as follows:

In a mood of general hilarity or euphoria, he sweeps in, flings his arms around Mrs Halloran ('Delia, you old monster, what are you doing here?'), demands, with an urgent clicking of the fingers, a whole pile of photographs, looks at his watch, remembers he has an appointment, begs me, with his ravishing smile, to take them up to his room, and sweeps out again, leaving a trail of disorder and excitement.²³

In contrast to Frances who is much impressed by Nick's presence and calls his visits "lightning," Dr Leventhal and Olivia remain highly critical of him. Frances makes one major mistake in her characterization of Alix and Nick when she thinks that they both had a splendid childhood, are used to the love and attention of others and therefore, through their self-assured appearance, get

²¹ Ibid., p.61.

²² Ibid., p.38.

²³ Ibid., p.11-12.

the love and attention of others without any effort. Not once does she realize that they are as insecure and lonely as she herself and only cover up their weakness through behaviour which ensures them the recognition of their social surrounding and thus provides them with a sense of identity. Nick's silence at the restaurant, compared with his "lightning visits" at the library, clearly indicates that his behaviour at the library is merely a show. At the restaurant he is not in need of attracting attention, for there his wife performs the act for him. Through her, he is certain to gain as many looks as possible.

Nick's behaviour at the restaurant parallels Frances' secret desire to remain passive in an affair with a male partner like Nick. As stated above, Frances' ideal partner is a man like Nick who actively attracts the attention of others and through whom she is indirectly able to gain the looks of others. While Nick actively performs when he is on his own, he easily falls back into passivity when his wife is with him.

Frances, however, is not aware of this and thinks that Nick and Alix attract the attention and sympathy of others, but that they are not in need of it. Thus Nick and Alix become autonomous parental figures for her who do not actually need her and in front of whom she consequently feels like a child. In fact, they become the ideal parental figures for her for which she has always longed and Frances, in turn, is the ideal prey for them, for they actually need individuals like Frances as an audience who believe in the reality of their performance. Just like Nick, Alix appears to have been deprived of her parents' attention. Frances never mentions Alix speaking of her mother and her tales with regard to her father in Jamaica may be partly the wish-fulfilling fantasy of a neglected child. Yet both Nick and Alix cover up their need for love and attention by pretending that they find fulfilment through each other. By playing the ideal, happy couple they perform one of the most profound wishes of human beings. This narcissistic look of love in which one is reflected back and thus made whole is a common wish and by acting the role of the happy couple they ensure the admiring gaze of their social surrounding. The following scene described by Frances underscores the exhibitionist motive of their behaviour:

'Oh, poor baby,' a muffled voice would reply, usually from inside the clean shirt into which Nick was changing, before we all went down to the restaurant. 'Come and make her tell me,' Alix would call out, and she was almost serious. He would come into the sitting room, his sleeves inside his

shirt but his chest bare, and I would watch as he bent over to her and nuzzled his face in her hair.²⁴

Whereas Frances initially suffices as an audience for Nick and Alix, they gradually demand their share in the entertainment which means that they want Frances to perform for them. Thus they invite James Anstey and introduce him to Frances as a partner. Frances accepts James, because only through him can she guarantee the continuation of her friendship with Nick and Alix, but she also states that she is not in love with him, at least not in the fatal sense, as she calls it. The man of whom she never speaks and whom she loved 'in the fatal sense' must have been a person like Nick, because only for a person like Nick, who attracts the attention of others, can Frances abandon her whole self and allow passion to rule over reason.

Frances does not fall in love with James, because he is not like Nick, as she emphasizes, but she turns him into a father figure who provides for those things she lacked during childhood. About her first walk with James she says:

I was not falling in love. Nor was there any likelihood that I might. But I was being protected, and that was something that I had not experienced for as long as I could remember. I was coming first with someone, as I had not done for some sad months past, and in my heart of hearts for longer, much longer.²⁵

Having once experienced passionate love as humiliating, Frances wants her relationship with James to remain innocent, as she says, because that is the kind of love she has been taught is proper and as James comes from the same social background he initially appears to be satisfied with the progress of their relationship. When Frances once asks him whether he finds her dull, he answers: "Dearest Frances. You couldn't be dull if you tried,"²⁶ but later on, under Alix's influence, he gradually becomes dissatisfied.

While Frances refuses the offer to move into Nick's and Alix's spare room because she wants to maintain some distance to her friends and be able to write, James accepts the offer. By moving into the spare room, James symbolically joins his friends and accepts the role as entertainer in turn, whereas Frances stubbornly clings to her role as uncritical observer of which her friends have tired. Although Frances states that she remained uncritical throughout their

²⁴ Ibid., p.33-34.

²⁵ Ibid., p.83.

²⁶ Ibid., p.91.

friendship, she actually does not remain so. She points out the reason for not moving into Nick's and Alix' spare room as her inability to dismiss Nancy, but in reality the spare room would deprive her of the possibility to write. In contrast to real life where Frances occupies a rather passive role, writing provides her with the power to give shape to reality. As she hides her individuality and her creative powers, however, Alix gradually tires of her and throws Maria as a bait to James who accepts Nick's and Alix's rules of the game and quickly discards Frances. Frances' desperation when she realizes that she has lost James forever is due to her realization that his loss means the loss of Nick's and Alix's friendship. The loss of James alone would not cause such a great anxiety in Frances, but the loss of Nick and Alix means for her the loss of the attention of her surrounding which she shared as their friend.

Being thrown back on her own self, Frances takes recourse in writing, yet again she remains passive and adopts a behaviour which, in social terms, is called 'proper.' In her narrative she turns herself into a victim while at the same time carefully avoiding to put any blame on the persons who made her suffer. As Lynn Veach Sadler points out, "pretending to be uncritical, she is anything but that"²⁷ and she uses all the devices which will ensure her the sympathy of the reader while at the same time blaming Alix for her situation.

Although Frances in her narrative is critical of her friends, she is still very mistaken about them. Her lack of knowledge of herself and her friends indicates that in the near future she will once more succumb to the charms of other exhibitionist persons in relation to whom she will continue her passive behaviour and who will, in turn, use her as their audience and finally discard her because of her unwillingness to participate in the performance.

The ideal model for her is Olivia's family which she, however, rejects as its members are the exact opposites of persons like Nick and Alix. While Nick and Alix only look at each other with the purpose of attracting the attention of other individuals, the members of Olivia's family look at each other without any exhibitionist purpose. Frances describes the Benedicts' family life as follows:

Those Sunday afternoons, which I have occasionally spent with the Benedicts, are a revelation to me of family happiness. They all talk, which always strikes me as faintly amazing, until the heat of the fire and the

²⁷ Ann Veach Sadler, *Anita Brookner*, p.38.

peace of the afternoon becalms them, and the conversation dwindles to murmurs. I have seen them all sitting together with their books, each taking sustenance from a different story, but most potently together.²⁸

Contrary to Nick and Alix who exhibit their intimacy at public places, the Benedicts are content to remain within their four walls and are in no need of observers.

The Benedicts' unwillingness to attract the attention and admiration of their social surrounding will always lead to Frances' opinion that they are, actually, insignificant despite the fact that Olivia's father is a company lawyer, her brother a doctor and her mother was made a Life Peer by Harold Wilson.²⁹ The reasons she gives for not marrying David Benedict at the end of her narrative are not very convincing and it seems more probable that the main factor is David's actual passivity with regard to gaining the attention of his social surrounding.

Her friendship with Olivia is characterized in the same way. Frances states that Olivia is a close friend of hers, but she never views her as an indispensable friend and never shares any intimate feeling with her. Olivia, on the other hand, does not need any explanations on Frances' part. She understands her quite well. As Ann Veach Sadler points out:

Olivia does know at least something of what goes on with her. She is willing to become involved enough to help Frances find a way to go off with James, though she wants Frances and her brother to marry. She also, without words being exchanged between them, raises a clenched fist to James. Frances nonetheless chooses Alix over Olivia, succumbing to the pattern of the ascendancy of the beautiful person.³⁰

Frances will always succumb to the charm of people like Nick and Alix, and always reject persons who are not in need of the attention of their environment, because they really value each other. As mentioned above, Frances poses as an uncritical writer, but actually does everything to turn herself into a victim and put all the blame on Alix. All through her narrative she conspicuously misjudges herself and her friends and this lack of insight into her situation will always lead to her victimization. As John Skimmer observes: "Nick and Alix produce a particularly disturbing image from 'some basement

²⁸ Anita Brookner, *Look at Me*, p.150-1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.62.

³⁰ Ann Veach Sadler, *Anita Brookner*, p.38.

area' of her personality"³¹ which she wants to forget. Subconsciously she realizes that her past experience, of which she never speaks, repeats itself in her friendship with Nick and Alix and the fact that Frances still has not learnt about the true character of her friends clearly points at a future victimization. Frances has been deeply hurt twice by people to whose charm she succumbed and it is evident that she will succumb at least a third time, for her narrative clearly reveals that she has not learnt anything in her two previous experiences.

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³¹ John Skimmer, *The Fictions of Anita Brookner: Illusions of Romance*, p.61.

