



拒绝合唱

——当代世界英文女性小说研究

张磊·著

Writing Against the Grain:

Contemporary English-language Fiction by Women Around the World



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Preface

It can now be safely stated that contemporary English-language fiction written by women has indeed breathed a new breeze into the literary world in more than one way. Compared with their literary mothers and grandmothers, contemporary women writers have made obvious breakthroughs in writing space, literary themes, as well as (especially) narrative strategies.

In writing space, contemporary women's fiction in English is no longer strictly limited to that in Britain and the United States. In fact, it has blossomed all around the world, stretching all the way from Ireland to Cyprus, from Jamaica to Samoa, from India to Nigeria.

In literary themes, contemporary women's fiction in English is full of diversity and complexity. Some of them continue to delve into the necessarily intricate relationship between the two sexes, or the equally ambivalent relationship between the mother and the daughter in a new context. Others tend to investigate the various dilemmas of professional women today. Still others interest themselves in the interaction between women and wars, or the interaction between women and national politics. In most of their fiction, all these issues are seldom separate. Instead, they are often interwoven with each other, making the narrative unprecedentedly profound and thought-provoking.

In narrative strategies, contemporary women's fiction in English merits our especial attention. Generally speaking, despite the visible

differences in various texts, contemporary women's narrative strategies are invariably characterised by unprecedented audacity and relentlessness, largely subverting "History", or the male-dominated narrative discourse. At the same time, contemporary women also make unending efforts to rewrite their "her-stories", or the unique, alternative discourse that can give eloquent voice to women's long-hidden thoughts and passions. Specifically speaking, these literary strategies mainly concern the empowerment of women through space, body and voice.

First and foremost, contemporary women writers in English have started to radically challenge the taken-for-granted legitimacy of "house" "room" and "home", all signifiers of traditional patriarchy. Instead, they tend to actively explore and expand space for their own living and development. Actually, this question was raised in as early as the early 20th century by Virginia Woolf in her celebrated *A Room of One's Own*. For Woolf, the reason why women writers cannot get wide recognition lies in the fact that they are lacking in a necessary and independent room of their own for living and working, thus largely restricting the full display of their talents and individuality. Today, despite the fact that it is not as severe as before, the problem of lacking a room of one's own still persists in subtle and yet unmistakable ways. Therefore, it is still of great necessity and urgency to find or construct space that truly belongs to women without male intervention. For instance, in her celebrated *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson from the United States eloquently probes the dynamic and mutually shaping relationship between the modern female identity and the idea of home.

The second site for contemporary women writers' self-empowerment is the female body. In not a few novels and short stories, contem-

porary women writers have strongly questioned the patriarchy's pervasive regulation and control of the female body, and actively claim its agency and independence. In 19th century fiction, the presence of the female body is often deliberately erased or downplayed, as if it merely means something bad: seduction of a male, or damage to ideal femininity and virtues. The only positive function for a female body at that time lies in mere reproduction of offspring. Any transgressive act that goes beyond merely reproductive functions often ends in the severe punishment of women, as is shown in *The Scarlet Letter* and *Adam Bede*. However, in contemporary women's fiction, this all-too-passive treatment of the female body has been much changed. It has become an active and crucial means of (re) shaping a woman's subjectivity and self as well as a radical means of defying the order of patriarchy. For instance, in her all-too-famous *Lilian's Story*, Kate Grenville from Australia manages to espouse a new and radical kind of feminism through nothing but the grotesque, unregulated and ungovernable female body as the symbolic site of female power.

The third departure that contemporary women's writing in English makes from previous fiction lies in the unprecedented prominence of the distinctly female voice. Instead of being silenced by patriarchy and then getting used to voicelessness, not a few heroines in contemporary women's fiction in English tend to express themselves directly and loudly, without fearing or yielding to the patriarchal discourse. No matter if they eventually succeed or fail, their attempt to voice themselves in a daring manner is indeed laudable, showing a markedly different epistemology that is truly contemporary. For instance, in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, the Turkish writer Elif Shafak manages to empower an en-

trapped, en-caged, and imprisoned Turkish woman with a strong capacity for uttering her voice, which daringly defies various age-old patriarchal ideologies, especially the severely punitive Islamic law of the father.

The last but not the least feature that contemporary women's writing in English bears is the creative employment of a double as the vehicle of personal revelation. For example, in *The Pakistani Bride*, not only does she offer a convincing portrayal of the Pakistani bride herself, famed Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa also aptly introduces an American bride to a Pakistani Major. Despite their non-acquaintance with each other, the American bride indeed bears a great resemblance to the bride from Lahore in their initial shared romantic fantasies of the "exotic" and later "shared suffering" in a hostile men's world. What's more, the American bride's timely outburst is subtly and yet unmistakably instrumental in changing the Major's attitude towards her and eventually all women, including the runaway bride.

Despite the breakthroughs, especially in the skillful employment of new narrative strategies discussed above, contemporary women's fiction in English still has its own limits. First, in spite of their increasing audacity, their feminist agendas are sometimes easily compromised in harsh contexts, and their female voices also lack a certain coherence, sometimes even contradicting themselves. Second, in spite of the global nature of contemporary women's writing in English, not a few women writers' feminist concerns are still quite narrow and self-enclosed, thus unwittingly isolating themselves from others in their common pursuits.

Of course, generally speaking, there is no doubt that contempo-

rary women's fiction in English has indeed made and will continue to make a big difference in today's world in many ways, both directly and indirectly. There is every reason to make their eloquent and inimitable voices heard by both Chinese and international readers in a timely manner.

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Chapter 1 The Dilemmas and Struggles of Female Intellectuals and Artists: Reading Anita Brookner's *Falling Slowly* (Britain)

"Novels like hers are why we read novels." —*Christian Science Monitor*

"Anita Brookner works a spell on the reader; being under it is both an education and a delight." —*The Washington Post Book World*

When praises and acclaims like this are offered to someone like Tolstoy or Dickens, readers tend to feel more than at ease. However, when they are lavished on a contemporary female British novelist like Anita Brookner (1928–), most of us may reasonably raise an eyebrow: Why? What is so different about her? Does she really deserve them?

The first interesting thing to say about Ms. Brookner is that she never intends to be a novelist. In fact, prior to the publication of her debut *A Start in Life* in 1981, at the age of 53, she was most reputed to be an influential art historian, especially of the 18th century French painting. In 1967, she became the first woman to hold the Slade Professorship of Fine Art at Cambridge University. She was promoted to Reader at the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1977, where she worked until her retirement in 1988. Such highly professional achievement in art does not necessarily lead to a literary path. According to Brookner herself, she writes novels simply for a change, or to idle away the time. There is no lofty aim inherent in this attempt. This explanation certainly fails to satisfy our

expectations of what a writer should have in mind when writing.

Brookner's statement is both apt and insufficient as an explanation for her writing. The aptness lies in the fact that she never consciously intends to write with the deliberate gesture of a writer, which is more akin to a skilled performer. The insufficiency, however, lies in the fact that she consciously or unconsciously hides the tremendous importance of writing novels to herself. Committed to art and unmarried for life, she simply has too many tales of blessings and curses to tell about herself, both as a woman and a female artist in the contemporary urban world. Her sharp eyes trained in art, together with her skillful and precise execution in dealing with words, further make her an ideal (if late) bloomer in fiction writing.

Following the realist traditions of 19th Century masters like Jane Austen and Henry James, though certainly with a refreshing contemporary twist, she manages to vividly portray the often complicated and ambivalent female psyches in addressing such issues as self, love, sexuality, art, life, and their conflicting and irreconcilable demands in urban society in her twenty-four novels (and *At The Hairdressers*, her latest novella in 2011, available as an ebook only)^①. First pub-

① Brookner's consistent focus on such noticeably woman-centred themes is sometimes criticised as "too narrow" or "too repetitive". There is no doubt that Brookner is indeed a writer who is obsessed with a subtly feminist (or post feminist, aesthetically feminist) consciousness, endlessly and carefully ploughing her own terrain, and offering moving variations on the theme of "woman" in contemporary society—"different casts, same script". However, instead of being a limitation, this is exactly where her strength lies. Some critics even believe if Henry James is around now, Brookner is the only one he will truly approve of. Other critics also duly compare her so-called "narrow" narrative focus to that of Jane Austen, believing them to be both great artists of middle-class domesticity and womanhood. Still others argue that how to write is certainly more important than what to write. Brookner's control over her own material is certainly absolute, which more than justifies her writing practice.

lished in 1998, *Falling Slowly* may be less well-known than her 1984 Booker Prize winner *Hotel Du Lac*. However, the typically Brookerian theme of a woman and female artist's many dilemmas, as well as her often failed and still meaningful struggles undoubtedly reaches a new height in this artistically impeccable novel, thus making it an even better choice for new readers of her fiction. Specifically, the dilemmas that plague the Brooknerian heroines in this novel can be summarised as follows.

Oscillation between "Here" and "Elsewhere"

For Brookner, home is both present and absent. Apart from three years in Paris, she has lived in London all her life. However, she has "never been at home, completely."^① This is by no means a high achiever's affectation, but profoundly sincere. As the only child of Polish Jews, she understandably keeps a certain distance from those native Londoners. At the same time, her apparent lack of interest in Jewish matters, including its culture, language and customs, equally displaces her as an outsider. In other words, she feels doubly isolated and alienated, with neither to rightfully call "home".

The profound sense of homelessness easily finds its echoes in *Falling Slowly*. From childhood, the Sharpe sisters, respectively named Miriam and Beatrice, fail to find warmth and comfort in their family, which is populated by their patriarchal father, their grudging mother,

^① Shusha Guppy, "Interview: The Art of Fiction XCVII: Anita Brookner," *Paris Review*, 109 (1987), 150.

and their largely indifferent grandmother, who often wage cold wars in the presence of the children. They never stop dreaming of a better home other than the one they have—always “on the lookout for signs of a domesticity that was foreign to their own circumstances” (171)^①.

This secret wish for substitution lingers and well intensifies into their adulthood, which seems to promise in more than one way an alternative to their unhomely home, especially after the death of their parents and their gaining financial independence. However, this promise fails to materialise into reality, for “home” remains as, if not more, slippery and largely illusory as before. In the cosmopolitan world which largely resembles the bleak wasteland in T. S. Eliot’s poetry, the grownup sisters still feel trapped, imprisoned, en-caged, profoundly lonely and isolated, leading a mere existence characterised by boring routines and suffocating familiarities. In fact, everything “here and now”, including the various streets in London, the bus, the taxi, the library, the museum, the sky, and even the rooms of their own, seem to merely make the Sharpe sisters (especially Miriam) sad. Everyone “here and now”, including their nosy neighbours and their practical employers, is less than friendly (if not hostile), constantly intervening in their life in various guises, seeking potential control over them. Even the sisters’ mutual presence in each other’s lives sometimes makes them uncomfortable and profoundly anxious.

If London, or a London flat “here” lacks a certain “transcendence” (3) that is the mark of an ideal home, the Sharpe sisters’ at-

① Anita Brookner, *Falling Slowly* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000). Subsequent citations to this work are given as parenthetical page references in the text.

tempt to find it "elsewhere" turns out to be futile and disappointing as well. For instance, for Miriam, Paris offers an Edenic refuge to which she can escape and liberate herself. However, this badly needed refuge turns out to be a merely temporary one, equally problematic, equally full of uncertainties and unexpected annoyances. In a highly symbolic scene, Miriam the householder-turned-into-tenant, discovers to her dismay that a less cultivated neighbour even litters before her very door. There is no point in making a row, for her status as an exile and an outsider can hardly win sympathetic responses from others. She can do nothing but go back to London, despite her great unwillingness. Fortunately, back in London, she finally gathers her faltering courage to recognise her true situation and adopt a right attitude towards life: "She had a long winter to survive. It would not be easy. But she saw, for the first time perhaps, that if careful attention were duly paid, it might, it could, be managed." (227)

As can be seen above, neither "here" nor "elsewhere" can offer an easy and convenient space for the Sharpe sisters, especially Miriam, for the apparent geographical heterogeneity conceals a striking homogeneity that ultimately reduces everywhere to being a hostile presence, thus displacing everyone to the status of spiritual orphanage. Only when one comes to terms with this reality (this does not simply mean bowing to it), can one find inner peace and learn to struggle for an individual's development in a brave manner.

Imbalance between Career and Womanhood

Despite her brilliant career as an international authority on paint-

ing, Brookner cannot help lamenting over her single-hood and childlessness as her two great failures in life. Compared with those women who manage to strike a proper balance between career and womanhood, she certainly feels greatly inferior.

This sense of failure registers clearly and deeply with both Sharpe sisters. On the surface, they both excel in their careers, whose achievements far exceed those of their peers. Beatrice, the elder sister, is a talented pianist, who is frequently invited to perform classical music before large crowds and is rewarded in both name and financial gains. Miriam, the younger sister, is certainly no less successful than Beatrice despite the non-sociable nature of her work as a literary translator. Without the constraint of office hours or the fear of unhandsome salaries, she can lead a decent and respectable life.

Ironically, neither sister can gain true satisfaction from their careers, not to mention occasional hatreds for them. For Beatrice, her career as a pianist is hardly inspired, and the constant exposure to the judgmental gazes of the audience in playing often causes her untold fear and anxiety, sometimes even bringing her on the brink of insanity. Therefore, apart from being a means of gaining independence, this career is in many ways "a mistake, a misadventure" (181). As if this is not bad enough, Beatrice is later even deprived of her livelihood with the arrival of a new agent. For Miriam, the situation is hardly better. Despite her reliability as a translator, her work is often taken for granted. Besides, her day-to-day regular life of words and paper takes on an increasingly monotonous and mechanical nature, making her restless.

What's worse, this obsessive pursuit of career is made at the cost