

HOMELESS AT HOME: A STUDY OF ANITA BROOKNER'S *THE DEBUT*

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Abstract: Homelessness is defined as living in housing that is below the minimum standard or lacks secure tenure. The legal definition of homeless varies from country to country, or among different regions in the same country. The situation can vary from family to family. According to the UK homelessness charity Crisis, a home is not just a physical space: it also provides roots, identity, security, and a sense of belonging and a place of emotional wellbeing. These elements make the home a comfortable place for the members living in the home. Otherwise, the home without such elements remains a physical space. The present paper deals with the feeling of homelessness experienced by the protagonist, Dr. Ruth in *The Debut* by Anita Brookner.

Keywords: Homelessness, a sense of belonging, a place of emotional wellbeing, a physical space etc.

Homelessness means not having just a home. You are homeless if you have no home but you can be homeless even if you have your own home. The reasons for being homeless can be different based on different situations. The core elements of 'home' include: a sense of security, stability, privacy, love, affection, safety etc. Homelessness is therefore a lack of one or more of the elements that represent 'home'.

A home is a kind of nest, the center of one's life. A home is a thing where one should feel most comfortable in the world. It shapes one's attitudes, one's awareness, and one's self-esteem. A healthy home life is perceptibly an imperative factor in the quest of a momentous life. The healthy relationships between family members and the healthy atmosphere of the home itself define a peaceful or ideal home. Here, family members grow together with certain principles and values. Such a home becomes an underpinning for the family's common sense of purpose as it provides a springboard for the members to follow the desired goals.

However, it cannot be the case all the times. The home can be a source of comfort or the main source of stress at times, but it is still a big part and parcel of one's life. Traditionally, the family members should agree all the time and get along in order to be a nice. However, there's no rule that says they have to get along with everyone in the family all the time. Being related doesn't mean you'll get along in every situation, share the same views, or even enjoy each other's company.

The Debut by Anita Brookner is story of such a home where the protagonist, Dr. Ruth, to some extent, feels homeless. Brookner has used flashback technique to focus the life of Ruth. Brookner's protagonist Dr. Ruth Weiss, at forty, recollects her ruminations and narrates her feelings about the past. Her memories are full of bitter-sweet experiences. She is a successful author. Different aspects have shaped her personality. She says "it has started much earlier than that, when, at a faintly remembered moment in her early childhood..." (*The Debut* 7). It is a kind of hint that she had started shouldering responsibilities at the very early stage of her life. Her childhood experiences are quite noteworthy as it is the foundation of her life. She "remembered herself as a pale, neat child with extraordinary hair..." (11). This paleness must be the result of the burden of the house hold responsibilities. Taking into account the busy schedule of her parents, she had begun to sense that a kind of loneliness was about enter her life.

Her mother, Helen, was an actress who is of middle age. But she had managed herself to keep fit for the theatre. She used to take exercise. She liked her profession and the glamour. A beautiful home must also

be free from influences that can pollute its wholesomeness and spiritual grace. The influence of the glamour of her profession made Helen to indulge in herself, neglecting her duties to her family, especially to her daughter. Her father was a shopkeeper. Her father would be busy with the shop. The profession left him a great deal of time. Ruth remembers that he frequently remained present for the rehearsals of her mother which took place at the theater. He would supply her the best books to read during her childhood days. She reminds his giving her Everyman edition, with its comfortable assurance on the flyleaf. "Everyman I'll go with thee and be thy guide in thy most need to go by thy side". These words on the flyleaf speak a lot about the lonely condition of the child. Neither father nor mother had ample time for her, though they cared for her. She had no one to share her experiences. After the theatre activities, Helen would be tired and directly go to her room. Hence, the feeling of homeless at home must be experienced by her. It is discernible her that she must be missing the tender love showered by them.

The ample references about her granny in the novel are sufficient to at home show that the granny was the dear and the near person to her. Ruth longs for her granny and the days she spent in her company. Her granny looked after the home skillfully as her mother was always bust with the world of theatre. Ruth learnt from her how one can shoulder the family responsibilities. Ruth would return from her school and her granny would definitely answer her call. It means her father and mother were not at home. After the death of her granny, the home became silent and the things changed a lot. Ruth started to cook her food on her own. Whenever Ruth would cook herself something in the kitchen and would sit on the table, missing her granny.

Ruth recalls her childhood time as, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, maintained in her childhood by her youthful parents and her aging mother" (17). It was the best of times as her parents cared for each other. This was the positive thing she noticed in the home. It was the worst of the times as her parents were busy in their activities and hardly gave her time. The ultimate beauty in a home is its emotional and spiritual warmth and it was absent in the house of Ruth.

Teenage is one of the most important stages in the life a woman. Teenagers debate meaningful issues with each other and with their parents. About this stage of her life Ruth says, "it was hardly an adolescence other girls knew it, waking up to their temporary but so exhilarating their power over men" (23). She had no one to share her feelings at this stage of her life. She has some bitter memories about this stage of teenage life as it was not unlike the world of other progressive girls she knew. She remained thin and childlike and did not grow like the other girls. When her mother and the maid servant Mrs. Cutler would be indifferent to her, she reminds "George felt sorry for her". (24) Her father was a ray of hope for her.

Her parents were away from home most of the times. So she took her school as, "a sort of day nursery" where she sought comfort in the form of beans and sausages, stewed prunes and custard. Miss Parker was her favourite teachers. She wants, "Ruth . . . to go to university and become a scholar" (25). Ruth knew that her parents would not allow her to go abroad for further education. Perhaps, Helen thought that if she would go away from home, there would be no one to look after the house. So Miss Parker had to pursue her parents and Ruth got permission to get further education but not in the desired university. Her mother remarked, "Well, darling, that's settled. Are you satisfied?" (32). It was all against her will.

In the college, "she could work in the library till nine o'clock," (24). But though, "She missed the evening performance in the flat in Oakwood Court", (25) she preferred the library to her house. As there was hardly any member, except her granny, at the home. The college library was full of books and she enjoyed the pleasure of working in such a library. She "found evening hours in the library the most satisfying of her life." (27) To her the college, "was more of a home than home had been for a long time." (34). The feeling of homeless at home is clearly visible here.

She had some bitter memories regarding her parents as they moved from adulthood to their old age. Her feeling of homelessness generates I in the early phase of her life and before she moves abroad for her

higher education. During this period, She notices that stress was mounting at home. Brookner narrates, “She was beginning to realize increased problems of loneliness awaited her” (94).

For higher education she had taken admission in Paris. She comes back to see that George liked the company of Sally who was in charge of the book stall after some days. This unfaithfulness certainly was disliked by Helen who wanted to be away from the house. She was taken to her friend for the time being but due to homesickness, they had to return. At the Victoria station, Helen died of an attack.

Meanwhile, her earlier two love affairs were unsuccessful. Coming back to London, she had to take care of her aging and ailing father. There was only one person to help her and that was Roddy, the son of Sally's sister. As a matter of adjustment she had to marry him. But unfortunately Roddy died in an accident again she is found alone. She was again at home and the circle was complete. In her childhood she had served her parents and again at the age of forty she found herself serving her father at home where she had no one to share her feelings, except her father who was nostalgic about Sally and wants Ruth to be with him to take care of him.

Thus, her home for Ruth was a home full of stress, discord and loneliness. There was hardly any healthy the relationships among family members. The unhealthy atmosphere of her home disturbed the peace at home. Though her parents loved her, the circumstances made them to be indifferent to her. As a result she kept on brooding all the times. Due to the lack of communication, a kind of depression was observed in her. She tried to behave as per the values and principles in the books she went through. But ultimately, she came to know that her virtues were not rewarded. Yet, she is found nostalgic about the bitter sweet experiences. Her parents should have given time for her setting aside their stress.

To conclude, the healthy the relationships among the family members and the healthy atmosphere at home itself renders the home ideal. The Harmony at home, within a family, generates harmony between families. If the families are healthy, the societies are healthy and such communities render a great service in progress of a nation.

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