

Women and Self: Fictions of Jean Rhys, Barbara Pym, Anita Brookner

By Rajni Walia

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In the twentieth century, gynofiction has emerged as a powerful sub-genre of fiction and has acquired a special significance through exploration of new dimensions of the vitality, the changing role and status of women. This global phenomenon is reflected primarily in fiction, which serves as the authentic mirror of socio-cultural reality. Rajni Walia's book *Women and Self* offers an investigative, informative and perceptive study of three contemporary women novelists—Jean Rhys, Barbara Pym and Anita Brookner, who have found relatively less critical attention. Through an exhaustive analysis of the thematic pattern in their novels, one common concern in them is identified, i.e. lonely women's tragic life—the solitary life of married women in Jean Rhys, the ageing spinsters in Barbara Pym and Anita Brookner. The author has minutely analysed the various responses of these novelists to the problem of their women characters the unrequited love, disappointment and loneliness. While Rhys treats this theme with tragic intensity, Pym with comic resignation, Brookner uses tragicomic mode. One distinguishing aspect that separates them from their predecessors is their lack of sentimentality and self-pity. Despite the presence of feminist consciousness in their works, Rajni

Walia is justified in not regarding their works as feminist fiction.

This scholarly study begins with a cogent account of theory of women's fiction interlaced with a historical perspective. Each of the next three chapters is devoted to the analysis of the novels of Rhys, Pym and Brookner. The discussion on each novelist is centred on her major novel, viz. *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Rhys), *Excellent Women* (Pym), *Hotel du Lac* (Brookner). A synoptic view of their other works is also provided. The main focus is on the self-analysis as it manifests in these works, characterised by self-mockery in Rhys, satiric undercurrent in Pym and ironic tone in Brookner. Women characters and their presentation have been classified with commendable critical acumen and discretion. Rhys uses stream of consciousness technique for delving into the thoughts and feelings of her heroines. Rhysian women represent archetypal feminine consciousness; she seeks happiness through love and protection from men. Pym's women characters are creatively engaged with life: they are victims of unrequited love yet retain a healthy interest in life. Anita Brookner re-examines the given assumptions about women. She dissects the inner landscapes of her characters. Her quest is for an

appropriate model of womanhood. Her principal merit is identified in her technical finesse.

Rajni Walia's book is an appreciable critical study. It offers a highly organised discussion of both the themes and the techniques—style, tone, point of view and texture of the works. The literary texts are closely examined in terms of the emergence of self in women characters and the process of empowerment within them, through self-knowledge. The process of the renewal of the female self through assertion of the self, through fruitful engagements and through introspection in order to meet the challenge of marginalisation of women in patriarchal society reveals how women's writing can help in transforming the existing social and cultural structures. The study concludes with the suggestion implied in the novels that empowerment of women is possible through the preservation of their autonomy and integrity.

Rajni Walia's book is a very useful contribution to the critical study of gynofiction. It is written in a readable style and largely free from critical jargons.

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