

Australian Fiction: Prominent Themes

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Abstract: *Australian literature is written or literary work produced in the area or by the people of the commonwealth of Australia and its preceding colonies. During its early Western history, Australia was a collection of British colonies; therefore, its recognized literary tradition begins with and is linked to the broader tradition of English literature. Because of its geographical isolation from the rest of the world, Australia came into contact with other countries very late. At the turn of the twentieth century Australian poets started dreaming about the future of Australia and its identity. Something that reminded constant was the focus of the poets on the landscape of Australia and their neglect of the people and character of Australia. The general preposition holds both indigenous Australian and those European descend. The white Australian community is united in part by its awareness of itself as a settler society with a continuing celebration of pioneer values and a deep attachment to the land. And for Aboriginal people their traditional culture, stories and songs are seen in their literature.*

Keywords: Commonwealth, Geographical, Isolation, Indigenous, Aboriginal

I. INTRODUCTION

Australian historical function tends to fall into some dominant categories, reflecting perennial themes that are forever being reinterpreted- first settlement European inland, exploration, pastoralism, conflicts with Indigenous Australians, patriotism and war are common themes of Australian historical fiction.

Australian literature is not necessarily set in Australia or explicitly about Australia or Australians, but it reflects upon, explores, celebrates or gives over human experiences through stories which are informed and influenced by deep and long- lasting experiences of Australian culture, geography, landscape and climate. During the 1890s Australian Identity dominated Australian fiction. Novelists were concerned with the life in the bush. The bush became the vehicle of expressing national characters. Novelists explored the Australian landscape in their novels. The significance of this study is that it attempts to analyze contemporary themes in the fiction regarding Australian novelists.

The narrative art of Australian writers has, since 1788, introduced the character of a new continent into literature- exploring such themes as aboriginality, egalitarianism, democracy, national identity, migration, Australia's unique location and the complexities of urban living and "the beauty and the terror" of life in the Australian bush.

The present researchers frames a history and development of Australian literature from its humble beginning to its aboriginal culture and goes on to detail some of the contemporary themes and techniques of different Australian authors and their literary works with special references to their major contemporary themes. The purpose of the proposed research is to attempt a thematic study and critical survey on contemporary themes in Australian novels and to give an overview of contemporary Australian novelists with special reference to their prominent themes and techniques of Australian literature like landscape and environment, Australian culture, identity of the settlers, isolation and estrangement, migration experience.

The representation of Australian themes of friendship, mate ship, love family relations and the complexities of modern living which leaves some intense impact on reader's mind that focuses on the study of human relationships through various characters of the novel and a psychological analysis through some different aspects in these stories that reflects the beauty of Australia which is combined with the narrative art of Australian writers. National identity is a unique theme to talk about because it not only serves bravery and strength as masculine traits but also feminism which is the idea that there's no single way to be a man. This specification of both the traits of Australia allows exploring these themes of romantic platitudes; mystery and science elements writers have created a wonderful plot in the novels.

Australian fiction is no longer compelled to concentrate on the 'matter of Australia' to proclaim its identity as a National Literature. It has also challenged the idea that one representative literature speaks to all Australians. Contemporary Australian fiction does this when it attempts to re-write or re-present dominant narratives about Australia its history, its migration patterns, its Anglo-Celtic identity and its relationship to the aboriginal owners of the land. Though the facts of the first century of white settlement have not changed, the stories Australians tell about them today are very different from the ones told fifty years ago, especially with regard to relationship between the white invaders and the original inhabitants of the country, the aborigines.

The fiction seen in Australia today covers Anglo-writing, Migrant writing and Indigenous writings. It has moved from its initial concerns with romance and realism to a rich diversity that puts it on par with the best contemporary fiction anywhere in the world. Their fiction today is characterized by formal inventiveness, experimental design and structure. It is richly diverse in its expression and investigation of Australian culture. Key elements in that process have included the post- colonial condition (the remaining and reevaluation of the past in the present), the emergence of challenges by women writers and the assertion of new directions in Aboriginal culture.

Australian fiction from the sixties to the nineties began with a rejection of the Australian Legends (i.e. the pioneer legends that values of the settler such as egalitarianism and fairness) and moved towards a post- modern fabrication or refusal of signification (meaning-making systems). If it is necessary to set a date for contemporary fiction in Australia it would be from the 1970's onwards for, this period has been the most productive in terms of value and volume. Helen Daniel in her book about the new fiction writers of the 1970 generation referred to them as 'Lear's' because of their various moves away from conventional realism. This helped her to group together different writers under a common tendency to undermine the authority of fiction. Writers today are concerned with the distance between language and perception. Janette Turner Hospital in *The Last Magician* (1992), The image of the vortex or spiral is used to demonstrate the accumulation of meaning. Contemporary Australian fiction has many strands. There are the traditionalists- followers of the realist tradition of Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy- who continue to take up themes of social realism. Some of this new fiction can be seen as a development of the old realist and nationalist tradition as it moved from nationalistic identity to a confrontation with communist politics and then on to a re- examination of cultural identity.

The Realists

Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy and Barbara Baynton were realists who preferred to deal with ordinary men and women. Like D. H. Lawrence, they believed in the novel as a reflection of life, the fundamentals of which are simple: countryside, the great Australian Outback (the bush), though they have also written city novels. Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* is the celebration of a bush hero but it is, also a satire on a national type. The traditionalists were also responsible for the formation of a nationalist stance- and a national identity. The 1890,s saw Australia on its way to federation. This nationalism has since come under attack as it is believed that this concept of nation was realized respectively and therefore never existed in the 1890's. It was a myth. It has become impossible for a largely urban society to identify completely with 'national' types like the 'bushman' or the 'larrikin' (a rough, rowdy, boisterous young man). Contemporary feminists have questioned the masculinity of this national identity forged by these traditionalists. They have challenged the male national mythology of mate ship (the ideal of brotherhood) Australian ideas of mate ship were a product of their isolated way of life where 'a mate was a bulwark against loneliness, a help in time of sickness and accident'. (John Docker, *In a Critical Condition* 1984, p 116).

The Traditionalists

The traditionalists set up a discourse that saw an oppositional relationship between Australia and Britain. The landscape and people took on a distinct Australian identity. The closing word of Lawson's story, 'The Bush Undertaker', mirrors this stance: "And the sun sank over the grand 'Australian bush- the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird and of much that is different from things in other lands'. Contemporary writers have contested this notion that a post colonial nation can only represent itself in reference to a European model. Traditionalists have conceptualized Australian space either as a hostile prison house or as a Utopian paradise. This dichotomy of a 'double aspect' as Judith Wright calls it continue in contemporary fiction. The specificity of place continues to play an important role in fiction.

The place is so big that it can never be written out. Opposed to the realists there was the other steam of traditionalists, the writers of popular romance such as Tasma (Jessie Louvreur) and Ada Cambridge. This parallel tradition continues in contemporary fiction. Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) brought these two traditions of realism and romance together providing at the same time a position for a female subject in a patriarchal male oriented society.

Repositioning

Basically Australian writing is a New World Literature reflecting the concerns of displaced peoples and cultures such as the Anglo Celts and European Whites (displaced from England and Europe) the Aborigines (displaced from their own land), the migrant writers who adopt their language and culture to life in a new land and the internationalists (the trans-cultural writers) who try to re-colonize the old world. Contemporary fiction in Australia reflects the conflicts between power and ownership, high and popular cultures, male and female, between generations, between metaphor and metonymy and formalism and realism. Contemporary narratives provide a cognitive map Australian society, indicating the nation's preoccupations and a commenting on Australian life. There is also a move away from nationalistic concerns. Writers investigate or depict the nature and influence of political (or personal) power. They are engaged in constructing a new Australian tradition. Locality and place has become important vehicle for the exploration of a sense of identity and the colonial past. Recent Australian fiction reflects not just an Anglo-Saxon or Celtic heritage but a multi-cultural, multi- vocal society with difference in the way Australians see themselves. All these concerns will be illustrated later in the works of individual writers that make up the new diversity of Australian fiction. Many Australian novelists have been drawn to a re- writing of their country's historical past in an effort to understand it. Aboriginal writers like Mudrooroo (formerly Colin Johnson) and Sally Morgan contests this white mythmaking and attempt to reclaim aboriginal history. Contemporary writers focus on the functionality of history and this contradicts the notion that history is 'constructed'.

Women's Fiction

The last forty years have seen a great upsurge in women's fiction in Australia. Debra Adelaide's 1998 bibliography lists 450 women writers. Australian publishers were accused of a feminist bias. The distinctive features of women's writing in Australia are its "energy, its resilience and its determination to tell the truth, even when this contradicts the comfortable complacencies of Australian belief" (Shirley Walker, *Guide to Women's Literariness*, p.171) Dale Spender, the Australian feminist critic, maintains that, women writers wrote about different issues in different ways from the men. "What women writers saw and made of the continent and its inhabitants was a long way from the world of 'mateship' and make a decidedly different body of literature with distinctly different traditions." The women's literary tradition has provided the voice of the 'other' which challenges the optimistic centralist vision of Australian life. Women writers like their counterparts in Britain, America and India wrote different kinds of fiction. Some were interested in re- historicizing the past, some in family sagas, others in social realism while some others examined the writing process. Nearly all were attempt to capture certain areas of female experience.

The Aboriginal fiction-

Another important skein in contemporary fiction is that of Aboriginal writing. Aboriginal novelists, like Mudrooroo Narogin (formerly Colin Johnson) find the issue of where home is rather problematic. His first novel *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) is densely plotted and follows four days in the drifting life of an angry nineteen years old Aboriginal petty criminal after his release from prison. The sense of time in this novel is elastic as the past blends into the present, his best known novels weave character and incident with ironic dexterity. Archie Weller's social realist novel *The Day of the Dog* reflects the anger and frustration experienced by young urban Aboriginal in Perth. The female aboriginal voices find expression in poetry and autobiography rather than in fiction, except for faith Bandler's *Wachovia* (1977).

Migrant writing

Migrant writing is one more significant area in contemporary fiction. Here too there are both male and female voices. A vital theme in Australian fiction is the question of where home is and consequently the fate of the home comer to Australia, the nation of migrants ("Everyone after Cook is migrant") which has adopted multiculturalism as a part of its national policy continues to produce writing that critiques the conflict between cultural and physical belonging.

Novelists like Blanche D' Alpuget, Robert Drewe and Christopher Koch try to situate Australia within the Asia- Pacific region rather than in relation to Europe. But the writers who reveal the development of a new hybridism in the Australian consciousness are the first generation migrants of contemporary society. Migrant writers have added to the vitality and diversity of the literary scene in Australia. The voice of the migrants now speaks through new forms of fiction. The writing produced by migrants who have recently arrived in Australia tends to be 'contrapuntal': it juxtaposes the old culture with the new- it is cross cultural- it is frequently nostalgic and its more often conventional. The most typical of such writing is the prose description of the migrant experience itself: the feeling of up rootedness or of cultural dislocation is strong and the struggle of the migrant to find his/her place in the new country is a major theme. Thus, it can be concluded that 'Australia' is itself a narrative formation and all listed up present different (sometimes compatible, sometimes conflicting) stories about its history, its peoples and its cultures.

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