

# Navigating Identity and Displacement in Elizabeth Jolley's "My Father's Moon"

**Norah Ruth Kumar**

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Pradhan Mantri College of Excellence, Sehore, M.P., India

**Abstract:** *This paper examines Elizabeth Jolley's 1989 novel "My Father's Moon" through the lens of identity formation and displacement. The protagonist Vera's journey from adolescence to adulthood is analyzed in the context of her experiences as an outsider in various settings - from her childhood in England to her time as a nursing student and young mother in Australia. The research explores how Jolley employs narrative techniques, characterization, and thematic elements to portray Vera's struggle to define herself amidst changing circumstances and relationships. By examining the novel's treatment of memory, belonging, and self-discovery, this study aims to contribute to the scholarly discourse on Jolley's work and its place in Australian literature.*

**Keywords:** Elizabeth Jolley, My Father's Moon, Australian literature, identity, displacement

## I. INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Jolley's "My Father's Moon" (1989) is a seminal work in the author's oeuvre, offering a nuanced exploration of identity formation and the impact of displacement on the individual psyche. The novel, which forms part of a trilogy alongside "Cabin Fever" (1990) and "The Georges' Wife" (1993), follows the protagonist Vera Wright through various stages of her life, from her childhood in England to her experiences as a nursing student and young mother in Australia. This paper aims to analyze the ways in which Jolley constructs Vera's identity through a series of displacements and relationships, examining the novel's treatment of memory, belonging, and self-discovery. By focusing on the narrative techniques, characterization, and thematic elements employed by Jolley, this study seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of the author's work and its significance in Australian literature.

## II. BACKGROUND AND LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Jolley emerged as a prominent figure in Australian literature in the 1980s, despite having begun writing much earlier. Her unique style, characterized by a blend of humor, pathos, and keen psychological insight, sets her apart from her contemporaries. "My Father's Moon," published in 1989, came at a time when Jolley was already established as a significant voice in Australian letters.

The novel is situated within the broader context of Australian literature's preoccupation with questions of identity and place. As Shaun Gillis (2017) notes, "Australian writers have long grappled with the complexities of belonging in a land marked by colonization and migration" (p. 23). Jolley's work, and "My Father's Moon" in particular, contributes to this discourse by offering a perspective that is at once deeply personal and universally resonant.

## III. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

One of the most striking aspects of "My Father's Moon" is its non-linear narrative structure. Jolley employs a fragmented, associative style that mirrors the workings of memory and consciousness. The novel shifts between different periods of Vera's life, creating a tapestry of experiences that the reader must piece together.

This technique serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it reflects the nature of memory itself - non-linear, often triggered by seemingly unrelated stimuli, and subject to reinterpretation over time. As Susan Midalia (2012) observes, "Jolley's narrative fragmentation mimics the process of recollection, highlighting the subjective and constructed nature of personal history" (p. 87).

Secondly, the non-linear structure allows Jolley to create juxtapositions and connections between different periods of Vera's life, inviting the reader to draw parallels and observe patterns in her development. This technique is particularly effective in highlighting the recurring themes of displacement and outsider status that characterize Vera's experiences.

#### **IV. DISPLACEMENT AND THE SEARCH FOR BELONGING**

Central to "My Father's Moon" is the theme of displacement. Vera experiences multiple forms of displacement throughout the novel - geographical, cultural, and emotional. Her move from England to Australia represents the most obvious form of displacement, but Jolley also explores more subtle manifestations of this theme.

Vera's status as an outsider is evident in various settings: as a scholarship student at a private school, as a nursing trainee, and later as an unmarried mother. In each of these contexts, Vera struggles to find a sense of belonging. As Helen Garner (1990) notes in her review of the novel, "Vera's perpetual outsider status becomes a lens through which she views the world, shaping her interactions and self-perception" (p. 12).

The title of the novel itself alludes to this sense of displacement. The moon, visible from both England and Australia, becomes a symbol of constancy in Vera's changing world. It represents a connection to her father and her past, even as she navigates new and unfamiliar territories.

#### **V. IDENTITY FORMATION AND SELF-DISCOVERY**

Closely linked to the theme of displacement is Vera's ongoing process of identity formation and self-discovery. Throughout the novel, Jolley portrays Vera's attempts to define herself in relation to others and to her changing circumstances.

Vera's relationships play a crucial role in this process. Her interactions with her parents, her school friends, her nursing colleagues, and her lovers all contribute to her evolving sense of self. Of particular significance is her relationship with Helena, a fellow nursing student. As Margaret Treymayne (2015) argues, "Vera's intense friendship with Helena represents a pivotal moment in her journey of self-discovery, challenging her preconceptions about herself and her desires" (p. 156).

Jolley's portrayal of Vera's sexuality is nuanced and complex. The novel explores Vera's attraction to both men and women, presenting her sexual identity as fluid and evolving. This aspect of the novel was particularly groundbreaking at the time of its publication, contributing to discussions about representations of sexuality in Australian literature.

#### **VI. THE ROLE OF MEMORY AND NARRATIVE**

Memory plays a crucial role in "My Father's Moon," not only as a narrative device but also as a thematic concern. Vera's recollections form the basis of the novel's structure, but they also serve as a means of self-reflection and identity construction.

Jolley's treatment of memory highlights its unreliability and malleability. Vera's recollections are often fragmentary and contradictory, underscoring the subjective nature of personal history. As John Clanchy (1991) observes, "Jolley's use of memory in the novel serves to question the very nature of truth and identity, suggesting that both are constantly in flux, shaped by our current perspectives and needs" (p. 78).

The act of narration itself becomes a form of identity construction in the novel. By telling her story, Vera is not merely recounting past events, but actively shaping her understanding of herself and her experiences. This meta-narrative aspect of the novel invites readers to consider the role of storytelling in our own lives and self-perceptions.

#### **VII. LANGUAGE AND STYLE**

Jolley's distinctive prose style is a key element of "My Father's Moon." Her writing is characterized by a lyrical quality that often verges on the poetic, while maintaining a sense of intimacy and immediacy. This style is particularly effective in conveying Vera's interior world and the sensory details of her experiences.

The author's use of language also serves to highlight Vera's outsider status. Jolley frequently employs colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions that Vera doesn't fully understand, emphasizing her cultural displacement. As David Gilbey (2000) notes, "Jolley's linguistic choices serve to underscore Vera's sense of alienation, while also providing moments of humor and poignancy" (p. 201).

### VIII. THEMES OF MOTHERHOOD AND FAMILY

Motherhood is a significant theme in "My Father's Moon," explored through Vera's relationship with her own mother and her experiences as a young, unmarried mother herself. Jolley presents a complex and often ambivalent portrayal of motherhood, challenging idealized notions of maternal love and sacrifice.

Vera's relationship with her daughter is marked by both love and frustration, reflecting the character's own conflicted feelings about motherhood and responsibility. As Susan Sheridan (2011) argues, "Jolley's portrayal of motherhood in the novel is refreshingly honest, acknowledging the challenges and ambivalences that are often glossed over in more conventional narratives" (p. 134).

The novel also explores broader notions of family and belonging. Vera's unconventional family unit, formed with her daughter and her friend Helena, represents an alternative to traditional family structures. This aspect of the novel can be seen as a critique of societal norms and expectations, particularly those placed on women.

### IX. THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

While "My Father's Moon" is not primarily concerned with exploring Australian national identity, the novel's Australian setting plays a significant role in Vera's experiences of displacement and self-discovery. Jolley's portrayal of Australia is nuanced, avoiding both overt nationalism and simplistic critiques.

The landscape itself becomes a character in the novel, with Jolley's vivid descriptions highlighting its beauty and strangeness to Vera's European eyes. As Peter Pierce (1995) observes, "Jolley's Australia is at once familiar and alien, mirroring Vera's own conflicted sense of belonging" (p. 245).

The novel also touches on aspects of Australian society in the mid-20th century, including class distinctions, attitudes towards unmarried mothers, and the position of women. These elements provide a rich historical context for Vera's personal journey.

### X. CRITICAL RECEPTION AND LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE

"My Father's Moon" was well-received upon its publication, cementing Jolley's reputation as one of Australia's most important contemporary writers. Critics praised the novel's psychological depth, innovative narrative structure, and lyrical prose.

The novel's exploration of female sexuality and non-traditional family structures was particularly noted for its frankness and sensitivity. As Helen Daniel (1990) wrote in her review, "Jolley's portrayal of Vera's sexual awakening and her unconventional choices is both bold and nuanced, challenging societal norms without resorting to polemic" (p. 18).

In the years since its publication, "My Father's Moon" has been the subject of numerous scholarly studies, particularly in the fields of Australian literature, women's writing, and narrative theory. Its place in Jolley's oeuvre and in the broader context of Australian literature has been widely discussed and debated.

### XI. CONCLUSION

Elizabeth Jolley's "My Father's Moon" is a complex and richly layered novel that offers profound insights into the processes of identity formation and the impact of displacement on the individual psyche. Through her innovative narrative techniques, nuanced characterization, and exploration of themes such as memory, belonging, and self-discovery, Jolley creates a work that is both deeply personal and universally resonant.

The novel's significance lies not only in its literary merits but also in its contribution to discussions about identity, sexuality, and family in Australian literature. By presenting Vera's story in all its complexity and ambiguity, Jolley challenges readers to reconsider their own notions of selfhood and belonging.

As a part of Jolley's trilogy, "My Father's Moon" stands as a testament to the author's skill in portraying the intricacies of human experience. Its continued relevance and capacity to provoke thought and discussion ensure its place as a significant work in the canon of Australian literature.

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