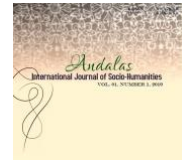




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Article

Australian Rural Identities in Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies*

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A B S T R A C T

Barbara Baynton, in her collection of short stories, *Bush Studies*, examines the various types of people that exist in the rural regions of Australia. She presents a study of different identities that were left out or wrongly represented in the traditional narratives of Australian national identity at the time. She dismantled the widespread and broadly accepted bush narrative of the Australian national identity that played a significant role in the marginalization of anyone who was not White and Male. Qualitative method is used to determine the accuracy of the hypothesis. It was observed that the women and people of other ethnicities belonging to the rural Australian region were marginalized through wrongful representation or no representation in the narrative of national identity and Barbara Baynton makes efforts in *Bush Studies* to do otherwise. She depicts the sufferings and psyche of the people in the rural region and presents a new layer of their identities. The theory used is Postcolonial Criticism.

INTRODUCTION

Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies* is a discourse on identity and its several complexities. It is in the context of the Australian National Identity, especially the one prevalent, which is the bush narrative. The rural identities are most often misrepresented in the various mediums of the region's popular culture. It is so because of Colonialism and the agenda of White Supremacy that desires to dominate all other cultures. Australia is a multicultural nation, and its beauty is in it acknowledging its diversity that has gained momentum only in the past 50 years. To understand the complexities of various identities, Baynton portrays in her work, and it is essential to comprehend multiple currents of its establishment, suppression, dominance and ultimately evolution and proper representation through the course of history.

Various cultural productions around the world are increasingly engaging in the discourse of identity. This preoccupation is justified as the term 'identity brings forth a myriad of complex

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issues. Australian identity is no different. In various areas, be it popular culture, the political stage or academia, the concept of Australian identity, especially rural, have been discussed, contested and negotiated. Australian rural identity, rather the bush – myth, has been directly involved in making the Australian National Identity (Butler, 2020). The ‘Bush,’ also known as the ‘Outback’, is an Australian English vocabulary that refers to the rural landscape of the Australian region. Australia is a heavily urbanized country to which much of the uninhabited robust internal forests, barren and farming land is unknown. However, in the discourse of Australian National Identity, the bush is a source of many of its traditional values. Some of them include mateship, resourcefulness and egalitarianism that are deeply rooted in the Australian National Identity framework.

The bush or the rural landscape of Australia is at once nostalgic and alienating. It is harsh and untamable but also homely. It is important to note, at this point, that the traditional values of the Australian National Identity and the bush narrative, both, are dominantly colonial. It owes to the fact that the quest for a national identity in Australia began in 1788 with an influx of the British settlers in the region. At that time, national aspirations emerged in many parts of the world, though more prominent in Europe, which led to the necessity to identify oneself as a nation. The identification was primarily made in opposition to other countries. Australia’s quest for national identity has similar motivations. Therefore, it can be understood that national identity is more of an invention, and rather a cultural construct. It especially applies to the Australian National Identity. According to Russell Ward, “the bush has shaped the Australian character, and the bushman stands for the “typical” Australian” (Butler, 2020).

The earliest Australia consists of the British and Irish settlers, the Aborigines, the Chinese immigrants and several others. However, the prevalent ideas of culture at the time came from those who were White and Male. They became the dominant norms and then the Australian National Identity thereafter. In this tradition of the Australian National Identity though, the independent, nomadic man who is a good mate and the harsh bush or rural Australia go together. This man is probably Anglo – Irish as well. These qualities and the idea of the bush became a symbol of a typical Australia and its ordinary inhabitants. It snowballed into a culture through a popular culture like different movies and books, political speeches and even news that come to the common masses. It is easier to understand that this construction is imaginary (Hollinsworth, 1992). This national tradition of identity put the White Man who tamed unforgiving rural Australia or bush on the pedestal and informed those who were different in the society. It is a type that did not include the Aborigines, the immigrants, the women, and, even though it was recognized as accurate nationally, it was resisted by those who stood outside this type (Lafferty, 2011).

The bush soon became a legend, and rather a myth. A violent history against the Aborigines and women also overshadowed the heroic charm of the bush myth, amongst other factors. The bush – myth is another crucial step in the evolution of the Australian National Identity. Interestingly, the people who perpetuated the myth of the bush never ventured into rural Australia. They were all city-dwellers. They engaged in the idealization of the rural landscape as it helped the colonial masters who could use Australia for raw materials. And Australia was no more a colony of the British, and romanticization continued, but this time around to create distinctiveness from the colonial masters, to create a culturally independent Australia (Lafferty, 2011). Even though the bush narrative is still very much part of the Australian culture and society, it is constantly challenged over the period. It is now seen as a contradiction of what Australia and its inhabitants are.

Many alternative narrations of Australian National Identity are being circulated from the early twentieth century. The first to do were the feminist historians, and in the literary arts, it was certainly Barbara Banton. The dissidents saw the bush narrative as the means for those powerful and dominant to oppress the others. It specified what was Australian in terms of traits and individuals, and culture (Moore 2014). The bush narrative did not account for the diversity or multiculturalism that exists in the Australian society in various contexts. Academic scholars, historians and writers began to recognize that the national values that the bush narrative propagated were masculine values that, in turn, fostered patriarchy. There was no place for women and other ethnicities in the bush narrative.

Barbara Baynton, in her collection of short stories, *Bush Studies* published in 1902, gives voice to those who were left out in the bush narrative or the idealization of rural Australia. She was born in 1857 and had an Irish lineage. Her first short story was published in the journal 'Bulletin' in 1896.

In the *Bush Studies*, she did not perpetuate the national ethos that was done quickly so by the male counterparts of her time. She presented an alternative version of the bush or rural Australia in her short stories. She successfully subverted many of the bush narratives' ideas of that era which included the harmonizing effects of the bush on the people that inhabited it and the masculinity that the bush narrative is associated with. Furthermore, other traits and ideas of Australian National Identity propagated through the bush narrative of rural Australia also came into the limelight.

The criticism of Australian nationalism of the time is a constant theme in all her works. She was able to do this, especially in her short stories, as she presented with the unique characters and situations uncharacteristic of the radical nationalist narratives like the bush – myth, amongst others. For instance, women were shown conquering the harsh land of the bush, and their sufferings were depicted, while male characters were seen as anything but the hero of the bush – myth, other races, and their condition in the cruel bush also got described. All this questioned bush society and its status as an accurate representation of the Australian National Identity in a real perspective; now, alternative identities appeared just as precise. *The Bush Studies* was deemed “unpatriotic” and received much negative criticism (Moore, 2014).

METHOD

The Qualitative Methodology was used to conduct the present research. The Qualitative Method was used because it presented an opportunity to divulge a wide array of aspects concerning the collection of short stories, *Bush Studies*, by Barbara Baynton. It is crucial to explore the varied dimensions of the social and political of the then and current Australian society as it helps to contextualize the book. Furthermore, it opens a window into everyday life, the experiences and mindsets apart from the culture and other social processes that are intended to inverse in the book by the author. The qualitative method allows understanding this complexity and multidimensionality.

The primary source is the text itself. Extensive readings have illuminated various aspects of the text, be it the author, context or the intrinsic value of the collection of short stories. The entire process was an interactive one wherein the interpretation of the text was formulated through internal reflection and response. Moreover, research works and dissertations by scholars on the text have been used to further the understanding and develop an appropriate hypothesis. Much of the information and its interpretations are derived from many secondary sources. The sources are governmental websites that have an official statement on the Australian National Identity.

Several journal articles have also been referred to collect the substantial arguments sought for observations.

Theory

Barret (2003) explores the absence of women in the bush discourse that has become a foundation of the Australian National Identity. It observes that the bush narrative is patriarchal and masculine and dismisses women's historical role by portraying them merely as supporters and bystanders. The most crucial aspect reveals that women are either lust or nurturers in the bush or rural narrative.

Bryant (2002) traces the experiences and values of the indigenous community of Australia that had been inhabiting the continent 40,000 years before the first British convicts and settlers had arrived there. It depicts how the early 19th and 20th-century society held traditional occupations were forced into oblivion through various political and cultural mediums.

Butler (2020) puts colonialization and the dominance of White cultural narratives over Australian rural regions' different cultures and ethnicities. It further emphasizes that the White narrative has sought to suppress the cultures of others and has resulted in their large scale marginalization as well. The author thus says that rural identity has been constructed through race and language. By doing so, it resultantly portrayed local identities that had either been represented poorly or not done at all. The social process that has been running over since the discourse of the Australian identity began has created a chasm between what is real Australia and what is represented as Australia. Both the factors came out crystal clear.

Dale (2011) attempts to bring Barbara Baynton's collection of short stories, *Bush Studies*, out of the negative criticism buried under, and had been in the misconception. When the short stories were first published, they were categorized as overtly dark and unpatriotic. The author tries to recontextualize the short stories with a new perspective. It observes that Baynton was deeply against the bush narrative and rejected it as a foundation for the Australian National Identity. It also states that the poor to none representation of anything that wasn't Male and White is deplorable and a disservice to Australia's diverse culture.

Dixson (1999) and Drexler (2007) examined the role of women in the Australian rural regions and what part they played in the making of the Australian traditional national identity. It observes the misogynistic limitation of women in the national discourse and the evolution of region's national identity where women and other ethnicities were given a voice. They also acknowledge and trace the contributions of feminist writers like Barbara Baynton in bringing about evolution.

Lamond (2011) analyses the short story by Barbara Baynton Billy Skywonkie to understand the representation of race. The author observes that Baynton very cleverly subverts the exact narrative of the white hero of the Australian culture who tamed the hostile rural regions. In doing so, Baynton has diminished the reliability of the White Man as the authentic voice. She takes it a step forward to show how the perceptions of this unreliable White Man have rather wrongly represented other ethnicities while what it did perceive as women and different ethnicities as is nothing short of mere contempt and prejudice. Diminishing the hold of the White race and revealing its agenda of superiority, Baynton questions and also vehemently rejects the Australian National Identity and keenly tries to forge a more inclusive one.

Wallace – Crabbe (1971) consolidates the essays by several literary critics over the years that have analyzed Barbara Baynton’s collection of short stories, *Bush Studies*, in a newer light. It includes critics like A.A Philips, Vance Palmer, Sally Krimmer and Alan Lawson et al. The critics observed that in terms of gender and genre, Baynton had pushed the envelope when she tried to dismiss the radically nationalistic bush narrative through the perspectives of her central female characters.

DISCUSSION

Barbara Baynton and her work had never been popular as they are now. She is recognized today around the world and in Australia for the themes of her writings that have greatly helped to dismantle a very rampant Australian legend. The legend is that the bush or the outback or rural Australia is a source of companionship, or mateship as it is known, resourcefulness and of developed strength of character who lived in the bush. She depicts that the truth is the complete opposite. Rural Australia is devoid of any culture, hospitality, empathy or compassion, and it only fostered malice, violence, greed and created meanness amongst the people who lived there. Contrary to the famous bush – myth that portrayed rural Australia as a “... nurse and tutor of eccentric minds” (Dale, 2011).

Baynton portrayed a rural Australia where religion exists but could not be more irrelevant, the ones who lived there are isolated or alienated. Amongst them, women are the most vulnerable ones. Toxic masculinity inflicts all kinds of injustices on the inhabitants that are not White and Male. In Baynton’s portrayal of the bush, there is no loyalty but only between a mother and her child. Therefore, through her writings, specifically her short stories, she contributed greatly to the undoing of a national legend that propagated a false and oppressive identity narrative. She portrayed instead the alternative identities of the rural that can be considered genuinely Australian (Krimmer, 1980).

These themes in Banton’s work revolve around women characters who are absent even though they are the protagonists. The female characters don’t have a name. They are, in the short stories, nameless, vulnerable central characters. The male characters are savages who have justifies their brutality to cope with the harsh rural surroundings (Wallace – Crabbe, 1971). However, is it implied in these short stories that the landscape is what it is because of the predatory nature of the men they have adopted. Several such ideas are explored in the short stories of Barbara Baynton that present new identities of the landscape and the different people that inhabit it.

In *Bill Skywonkie*, the female who is a central character is nameless and traverses across harsh plains to reach the place where she has been employed as the housekeeper along with a male, whose name is the title of the story. Other minor characters have names as well.

The woman is depicted as a sex object. When he picks her up from the train station, Billy refers to her as a 'young piece.' Even while introducing his friend, Konk, Billy refers to him as someone who has a monkeyish face that is nothing more than a dark stain on the entire landscape that diminishes any perspective of the landscape that needs to be perceived for thoughtful assessment. The narrative voice hints at the fear of the disabled. This treatment of one character of the others and the surroundings around it reveals the author's idea that tries to answer the question of what is hostile? The man or the land?

There are descriptions of the rural land as being hostile throughout the short story, but the source of the problem is shown as something else, which flies directly in the face of the bush – a myth

that creates the identity of a villainous land and the heroic man. In the short story *Billy Skywonkie*, the sun is referred to as greedy. Something that sucks the life out of the landscape, making it barren (Baynton, 1902). The title's name refers to a character whose name is associated with the sun as a clever patronym. This reference links man to greed instead of the heroic traits of bravery and independence fostered by the bush – myth. An alternative identity is created of a cruel, greedy bushman and often moulds whatever he sees of the land and the people in it in his own image. If something is hostile, it is the man itself.

The women who were absent in the bush – myth in *Billy Skywonkie* represent the dilemma of being alone in an unknown land. But considering that the woman in this short story is from the urban city of Sydney, we can understand that the woman also represents the unfamiliarity the city dwellers feel of the rural landscape. This portrayal tries to imply that the ones who created a national identity around the rural landscape are themselves unaware of what the bush truly holds. Furthermore, towards the end of the story, the woman begins to lose her mental balance when she becomes fully aware of the rampant masculine arrogance in the bush. She is referred, in the end, to a sheep which will be slaughtered at the hands of men of the bush.

Through the central character of the woman, the author can create the identity of city dwellers in the bush who cannot even begin to know the true nature of rural Australia. The essence of a cruel, arrogant bushman is created that harbours delusions of his own grandeur. Women's identity is created who will always find themselves to be the victims at the hands of men hostile men. The rural landscape is shown to play significantly less role in creating these identities. The perceptions of the rural landscape are used to reinforce what one deems more convenient. It is true when it comes to the representation of people from other ethnicities as well. Billy is married to an Aboriginal and finds it shameful. He also holds the Chinese migrants in contempt (Lamond, 2011). Therefore, the author creates the identity of a white man, though Billy, who views people of other ethnicities as outsiders and those who are being suppressed and displaced.

In the short story, *A Dreamer*, a pregnant woman returns to her maternal home in rural Australia. Like the protagonist in *Billy Skywonkie*, the woman returning from the city finds everything unfamiliar even though she is sure that she would remember everything of the landscape she grew up in. This depiction again reinforces the identity of an unreliable city dweller whose perspective cannot do justice to the rural landscape.

The woman projected throughout the story who battles the elements of bush in this short story put her in so much strain that her voice gives up on her and implications of death besides the pain around her sexual experience that remains unexplainable. Furthermore, she is also shown impending childbirth that she is to go through soon, revealing the toxic constructions of the gender of the bush – a myth that marks her voice and also her sexual experience as taboo. In this story, the struggle against the nature of the bush is less relevant than what the bush has come to represent. The bush in *A Dreamer* is a misogynous element against whom only the relationship, warmth and memories that the woman shares with her mother seem to provide protection. But when the mother dies, who the woman had been trying to reach out to, till the end, it implies that for a woman in that misogynous bush, there is no satisfaction (Schaffer, 1988). The short story gives the reader ample opportunity to realize the true nature of the bush – myth and what it means for the woman. A woman's identity is created in *A Dreamer* that is more than the quiet, supporting mother or daughter in the bush – myth.

The theme of challenging the stereotypical roles of men and women continues consistently throughout her short stories. *The Squeaker's Mate* is no different. In this short story, the man is the Squeaker who reflects the feminine characteristics in the bush – myth, and the woman is

the masculine mate. With this role reversal, she goes on to explore the concepts of marriage and sexuality. It depicts the woman to have the qualities of being hardworking, resourceful loyal and independent, which were part of the mateship narrative ascribed only to the bushmen (Wallace – Crabbe, 1971).

The potential of the women in the bush is shown but it is also shown to be thwarted in the end when we see the Squeaker's mate lying afraid and alone in a ditch with a broken back. The husband remains indifferent. The identity of a bush woman as that of a victim is reinforced again in this short story (Schaffer, 1988). There is a poignant notion of women being indifferent to other women has been included in this short story. The other women in the bush society do not take sympathy for the plight of the Squeaker's mate and therefore justify their indifference by regarding the mate as someone who deserved her fate, for it was a price she was going to pay anyway for her "independence."

The short story, *Scrammy And*, which begins deceptively as a light-hearted tale of an old shepherd and his mate, a dog named Waterloo, takes a sinister turn quickly. The story is not devoid of misogyny, often doled out to a young woman who helps the old shepherd around the house. The old man holds prejudices against women but also against the people of other races, in his case the 'Blacks,' who he regards as thieves. The character of the older man is built on the notion of not wanting to see the truth. The story depicts how the older man's vulnerability itself strengthens his prejudices. These observations of rural people add another layer to the entire identity of the white bushman in Baynton's short stories.

In his interactions, the white man, as seen in the *Scrammy And*, is very problematic. He looks down upon the woman in his household often referring to her as an incompetent fool. He treats her with contempt. Furthermore, he also seems prejudiced when it comes to people of other ethnicities that live in the rural region with him. He blames the Black people of the community to be the ones who are often engaged in disruptive activities. The old man that engages in a conversation lovingly with his dog is revealed to be a mean, arrogant and purposeless, biased man.

The old, white man represents the bush narrative which is portrayed as a real history of Australian rural inhabitants but it is revealed to be a colonial perspective that does not factor in the true realities of the women and other ethnicities. The reality of Australian rural existence is also depicted along with the impoverished conditions in which the women and people of various ethnicities lived. It is interesting to observe that in *Scrammy And I*, the white man is not only shown as an oppressor that not just dominates but also enforces its narrative, he is also shown as victim. The white man suffers from the unfamiliarity of the rural region, he finds himself alone in his ordeal. He is surrounded by nature he finds harsh compared to what he is familiar with, the English countryside. In his loneliness and suffering, he inflicts others around him with pain.

Bush Church begins with a satirical mocking of the traditional values of hospitality that the bush – myth had been propagating. It is shown that along with other conventional values of Australian nationalism, and hospitality is too merely superficial one there. Indeed, the social relations that the characters have with each other are dominant with meanness. Religion is also a point of negativity. It offers no protection, inculcates no values that should be deemed beneficial and much more. Therefore, it has no spiritual use or social use but only that which is radically practical. The character holding a government position, Keogh, has a god-like status. The person has nothing substantial to say for the good of the larger community, and the denizens of this bush society are nothing more than barbaric. The people are mundane and therefore they

are preoccupied with all that is vain. Apart from extensive creation of identities of ignorance, arrogance, barbarity, indifference, Baynton also creates the bush as a mere “chaotic wasteland” (Wallace – Crabbe, 1971).

The meaningless of time-honoured and institutionalized religion is also depicted in Baynton's short story, *The Chosen Vessel* that deserves to be analyzed in a systematic perception. The priest has political interests, and a hypocritical character like Hennessey is seen as a good Catholic by the minor characters. These instances undermine what the religion and its elements mean and therefore mocks their glorified treatment. Again, like her other short stories that portray strong emotional pitch, the men tend to see the bush possess a rugged beauty while it is nothing less than an enemy for women. In this story, the women are limited to domestic places while the men are concerned with the community's social, political, and economic aspects. It shows that women's dependency on men for financial security besides their protection and livelihood only foster patriarchy and the deplorable condition of women. The women are thoroughly dehumanized by the men of the bush in this short story. The prevalent notions of women are depicted, which the bush – myth propagates as well, either see them as a nurturer, a mother, or an object of lust. Something so profoundly wrong cannot be the foundation of the Australian National Identity. A big question is asked, and a question mark raised.

Through her short stories, Baynton constructed identities for the various rural people. She depicted their situations, their true nature themselves and their social relationships. She further dispelled the idealization and romanticism associated with the bush or rural regions of Australia and its inhabitants. For instance, she portrayed that the rural identity was more than the White Male. It included the Aboriginals, the Blacks, the Chinese and the immigrants. The bush or the rural regions can be harsh. Still, they were essentially unfamiliar to the city dwellers that created and perpetuated the narratives of identity around the inhabitants of the bush. Baynton also gave voice to the women in her short stories, which in the bush narrative created an identity for them that was subservient, weak and irrelevant to the social and political arenas of the bush society. Through her perspective of the bush narrative, Baynton brought out the various identities that are just as Australian as the White Male one and shed light on their deplorable conditions.

CONCLUSION

To sum it up, it is easily deduced that all the short stories in the *Bush Studies*, written by Barbara Baynton, have showcased perfect clarity and are based on single-mindedness to what it is trying to represent in the social as well as a political milieu. Therefore, it is apt that her stories, when they had been first compiled and published as a book the title could be *Bush Studies* instead because her short stories are indeed a study of the fundamental nature of the bush narrative. Its marginalizing effect on the rest of the population of Australia, which is not White and rural, and the study of the different identities that can be found in the rural regions of Australia or the bush. These stories perfectly analyze the bush for what it is really, the situations and the psychological effects these situations have on the inhabitants of the rural regions and their impact on each other. For instance, as observed in the short story *Scammy And*, the old white shepherd harbours prejudices against others ethnicities because of his own loneliness and hardships he has faced due to the rural region he quite naturally doesn't understand and has spent his entire life trying to reap benefit for himself out of the unfamiliar land.

Throughout the stories, some characters do not understand the rural landscape anymore because they have essentially become city dwellers but hold dear the delusion of familiarity. The writer has prudently projected such scenarios in the short stories that speak volumes about the social, cultural and political environment of the era. The situations that the various characters of the

respective stories find themselves as the hostile ones but the author shows that this is not due to the land but the inhabitants themselves who have failed to understand the land, adapt to it and therefore created a hostile narrative around the landscape instead.

An era is animated by the different characters and situations created through powerfully conveying messages through these short stories with their amazing character portrayals. One can observe the authentic experiences of rural Australia in the characters and scenarios as projected in the short stories showing the inhabitants as if presenting an era and its agonies. Even though every story has a dark and death, most of the time involving violent chaos, it only serves the notion of showing the vulnerability of each inhabitant, be it male or female and belonging to any ethnicity, they are the sufferers and encounter the situational ironies that they face. Such is characteristic exploration projected with solid characterization that make the collection of short stories seminal work on Australian exploration. Extensive symbolism reinforces these ordeals in all the short stories. For instance, be it death, malice, motherhood and meaningless in all the short stories constantly remind the bush of multiculturalism, hope, fragility, and wrongful representation.

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