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Reflection of National Identity in the Select Novels of Di Morrissey

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Abstract:

National identity and the nation are complex structures composed of number of interrelated components namely ethnic, cultural, territorial, economic, legal and political. They indicate bonds of solidarity among members of communities united by shared memories, myths and traditions. Nonetheless discourses of national identity do not develop in a simple linear manner but it goes deep into past and project forward imagined future of the nation. All too often discussion of national identity revolves around what are essentially national stereotypes. In present era of globalisation and rising ethnic nationalism, there has been an increasing scholarly interest in the subject of national identity. It is assumed that national identity is a kind of national essence that exists in a very fabric of the nation's land, culture and people. The aspirations and the common experiences, common language/dialect, values among the people of the region lays the foundation of what is known to be the national identity. A famous Australian novelist Di Morrissey projects national identity through her novels.

Key-concept: nation, Outback, national identity, Bush, Aboriginal, rock art, Landscape.

Introduction:

It is generally established consensus among the scholars that the novel is most suitable literary form for the exploration of experiences and ideas in the context of our time. Fiction is the most powerful form of literary expression today. It has acquired prestigious position in the world Literature. In its early Western history, Australia was a collection of British colony; therefore, its literary tradition begins with and is invariably linked to the broader traditions of English literature. Di Morrissey, an Australian novelist, expresses her deep and honest attachment to the land and territory through her novels. She describes in her novels the landscapes and environment of Australia with artistic lucidity and vividness. While mixing up with the Aboriginals her characters shared the history of the land. No doubt, there are violent

confrontations between settlers and Aboriginals in her fiction but, overall her point of view towards the native tribes is comprehensive and liberal. The researcher's purpose in this paper is to focus the aspects of national identity in her select novels. Before dealing with the theoretical part of national identity it is highly necessary to have a general idea of select novels.

Novels in nutshell:

In *The Tears of the Moon* (1995) Di Morrissey weaves a spellbinding story of a young woman named Lily Burton who, upon the death of her mother, embarks upon a search for her own family roots. The only link with her past is a beautiful mother-of-pearl pendant with distinctive markings. Her voyage of discovery takes her to Western Australia and a town called Broome. It is there that she finds her great-grandmother Olivia's diary and discovers the truth about her family and its heritage. This is an exciting story told against the backdrop of Australia's pearling industry of the pre-world war time. It is an enthralling adventure story laced with romance, as well as an epic family saga. The sequel to this novel is *Kimberley Sun* (2002) in which Lily revisits Broome town with her daughter named Samantha driving alone through the outback to finally and reluctantly confront her family roots. Together they swept into a world where myths and reality converge, as they find that everyone they meet has a story to tell and secret to share.

National identity:

The term 'nation' is politically and ethnically engulfed modern concept in political science. It has been derived from old French term '*nacion*' meaning '*birth*'. Broadly, it is used as a '*place of birth*'. (Wikipedia.org) The Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines the term in following words,

“...Community of people composed of one or more nationalities and possessing a more or less defined territory and government.” (Merriam-webster.com)

While the dictionary of law gives bit more comprehensive and reasoned definition of the term which is as follows,

“A people, or aggregation of men, existing in the form of an organised jural society, inhabiting a distinct portion of the earth, speaking the same language, using the same customs, possessing historic continuity, and distinguished from other like groups by the

racial origin and characteristics, and generally, but not necessarily, living under the same government and sovereignty.” (thelawdictionary.org)

Political scientists like Anderson defined nation as a “*community of sentiments or an imagined community*”. (Anderson Benedict, 1983) while Jacquelin Hogan interprets it in her book as,

“Nations are more than collection of people and institutions within bounded territories; they are integrated symbolic system....nations are constituted and sustained in part through stories and images that convey a sense of national belonging, of the nation as character, its accomplishments, its defining traits, and its historical trajectory...” (Hogan Jacquelin 12)

National identity is recently invented most fundamental and inclusive ideology of collective identity. It is truly global, pervasive and subjective phenomenon. The encyclopediadescribes national identity in following words,

“It is individual’s sense of belonging to one state or to one nation. It is the sense of nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, language, and politics. It may refer to the subjective feeling one share with the group of people about a nation.” (Wikipedia.org)

In psychological terms national identity is “an awareness of difference” and “a feeling or recognition of ‘we’ and ‘they’”. An individual’s national identity may result from elements like common language, shared history, blood ties, common culture, music, bounded territory and so on. He or she may incorporate beliefs, values, assumptions and expectations into national identity. They view beliefs, assumptions, and expectations meaningful and transform them into their daily practice. Anthony Smith illuminates the causes, success and failures of construction of nations in every continent and throws light on how the feeling of national identity is developed among the individuals in his seminal book entitled as *National Identity*. He professes elements of national identity in this book namely sense of political community, sense of legal equality and common code of laws, common values and traditions among the population, territorially bounded units of population, and the community of common history, memories, and decent. (Smith Anthony 9-10) The researcher shall study select novels in the light above-stated theoretical framework.

In the construction of Australian national identity the land and the human relation to it are the key factors. Specifically speaking of Di Morrissey, the major Australian popular novelist of

the post-modernist era; the history of the Australian landscape, people and their interrelations, communities and their forces shapes the consciousness of her characters in the novel. In case of her novel *The Teas of the Moon* (1995) the protagonist Lily Barton, an ambitious woman set out to search her family roots in Broome the north-west coast of Australia which is popularly known as Outback. The writer provides a historical dimension to the novel by describing early settlers' endeavour to establish themselves into the new country. The novel begins with Mrs. Barton's accidental reading of the diary of her great-grandmother Mrs. Olivia Hennessey, which takes the reader far into the past at Cossack. Mr. Conrad Hennessey and his wife Olivia were travelling by the boat towards the north-west coast of Nickol Bay. As the most settlers prefer to search the best possible place for their habitat, they restlessly search the same. They were helped by an adventurous young man Capt. John Tyndall. The idea of egalitarianism and mateship is an integral part of Australian national identity. The Hennessey couple was taken to Broome which was a budding town for pearling industry. Together they established peeling company and became one of the successful entrepreneurs helping each other in every trouble. The novel celebrated courage, hard work and perseverance of the first settlers. In this way these settlers developed feeling to 'belongingness to land' and 'belongingness to community' among the white settlers. The acquisition of land and involvement in its development gave an upsurge to a small but sharp consciousness of belongingness to the land and the people living upon it. In this regard Blainey says,

“...the tradition of mateship-collectivist idea that men should be loyal to men with whom they lived and worked-had its roots in the time when Australia was man's land...the idea of mateship flavoured Australian democracy...” (Blainey Geoffrey 171)

One cannot deny settlers' contribution to the industry and land development in modern Australia. The novel focuses on the multi-racial inter-relationship of these pearlers. Captain Tyndall marries with an aboriginal woman named Niah. She gave birth to a female child to whom they christened as Maya. Georgiana, Lily, Samantha, are the biological successors of Olivia and Tyndall family. Tyndall has many Japanese and Macassans crew members in his company and the feeling of brotherhood and 'fair go' among these people was cherished since from the early years of settlement. Such racial issues play crucial role in shaping contemporary Australia and the feeling of nationalism among its population. The colonial history of Australia is full of such racial clash and hybridity, especially, within settlers and Aboriginals community.

However, in Aboriginal people the community bonding is very strong. Landscape is seminal factor in shaping national identity and a sense of belonging. The process of shaping landscape is integral to the becoming of national identity. Most would agree that in order to feel a sense of belonging in a new country the process of becoming connected or psychological settling must be undergone by the emigrant population which is seminally focused in the novel of Di Morrissey. In case of Australia, a significant amount of scholarly attention has been focused on the means by which settler Australian tried to achieve psychological connection. In her novel she projects how the settler Australians did manage to overcome isolation and adversity, establish on land and also grew to love it. The task of planning themselves in the country with the labour of their own hands becomes a defining feature of Australian national identity.

The second novel selected here for the purpose of discussion is *Kimberley Sun* (2002). The novel describes Lily Barton's revisit to Broome, her acceptance of Aboriginal kinship, part-Aboriginality and socio-political issues arising out of it, and lastly political and psychological consciousness of national identity. In the very opening of the novel writer gives us realistic description of iconic Outback Bush region of Australia. The souring temperature, bright sunlight, vast and lonely desert intermittently interrupted by the walking Aboriginal people in group, horrific bushfires etc. have become distinct characteristic features of Australia. This region is culturally rich with Australian Aboriginal folklores, a unique dance called corroboree, history and heritage. While travelling through that desert Sami was told that this land apparently seemed untouched and no-man's land but it is not an empty because there are traditional songs and stories all around. Sami was told that,

“...Great Sandy Desert might start across the nineteenth parallel on whitefella maps, but beneath our feet, in the air, in the rocks is the ancient knowledge of the songliness and ceremonies of this tribal country. Some civilizations honour their monuments and certain buildings, but for us we honour the earth itself, the land is where we return.” (Morrissey, Di 425-426)

The Aboriginal people in sandy deserts may not be used to modern ways of lifestyle but they substantial part of Australia. This region is abundant with flora and fauna, animals, and birds which are specifically found in Australia only. It has deeply interconnected threads of people, landscape, and world's most unusual plant. It is much more than symbol of romantic notion of landscape. However, it was and is a common experience of the settler community that

they had to and have to face the unnoticed threats of the bush. Harsh weather is a cruel enemy of the first settler inhabitants. The native Aboriginals are well aware of the threats of the bush and the weather of the land. Rock art found in northern outback region of the country is cultural artifact symbolizing iconic feature of Australianness. Morrissey's native characters are not usually portrayed as a subordinate or physically mutilated. On the other hand there is a sort of mutual understanding between the white and native characters. The novel presents a synthesis in particular way of thinking about issues concerning what it means to be Australian; all are directed towards same particular interest-how belongings to and in Australia understood and interpreted. It is very interesting to see following statement made by one Mrs. Jacquelin Hogan in her book states,

“Nations are more than geopolitical bodies, more than collection of people and institutions within defined sovereign territories. Nations are discursive constructs, created and sustained, in a part through stories, images and landscape, scenario historical events, national symbols and rituals which give meaning to nation...”(Hogan Jacquelin 1)

Cultural diversity is one more important aspect of national identity squarely focused by the writer in her novel. It has been resulted from immigration and policy of multiculturalism. Australia has been a liberal receptor of various ethnic people from all over the world. In the novel the writer introduces characters of European, Asian, and African descent. These characters bring with them distinct cultures and traditions, ways and norms of leading life. Amalgamation of all these cultures gave a birth to unique kind of cultural landscape which is specifically a characteristic feature of Australia. Landscape itself is complex phenomenon which reflects human activity and is filled up with cultural values. It combines elements of space and time, and represent political, social and cultural constructs. It has gradually acquired many layers of meaning that can be analysed through historical, archaeological, geographical and sociological study as the evolution of human being. The most significant quality of true National identity is ability to accept others who are different to Australians. Australian has become a multicultural society and their identity has shifted from what it was in the past. Australians are used to the many cultures around them and most people have included aspects from different cultures or religions into their daily lives. The ability to accept things that are new and different and ability to tolerate things that one may not want for him or her but knows that it is important to someone else is definitely an aspects of the true Australian identity. In the novel characters like Laila

Kassadi and camel-man Farouz are Afghan nomads who frequently visit Australia. There is a vivid description of people visiting Dari outstation of outback from various countries. Their many years of stay in Australia have shaped and reshaped national identity of Australia. The protagonist herself is an Irish descendent while her friend Mika is Japanese by birth who has arrived to Broome to search genealogical history of her family.

One more characteristic featuring Australian national identity depicted in the novel is confrontation of Aboriginals and part-Aboriginals on shared platform of society. Modern Australian social structure is a result of historical and colonial encounters of white settlers and native Aboriginal communities. Di Morrissey depicts representative account of such encounter in *Kimberley Sun* and its Prequel *The Tears of the Moon*. Especially, dangling position of part Aboriginal population is aptly described by the novelist. When Samantha told her friend that she is not at all interested an open-minded union of communities only because,

“...her friends at university are deeply racist. There is a lot of baggage attached to even faint taint indigenous blood...” (Morrissey Di 126)

She is acknowledged the social threat posed due to such hanging position, not belonging completely to either of the communities. She knows that it will ruin her career completely if people know that she is part Aboriginal. But when she asked Dr. Palmer about this he tried to sort out all her objections,

“...Quite a lot of Australians are grappling with the same issue...Basically, how do we all live in this country and feel we belong here, whether we were born or just arrived? And how do we deal with the issues of land is it anyway?...No glib answer but a cliché instead-give it time...” (Morrissey Di 175)

It is very interesting to note that settler's identity in the context of belonging to the land is unlike Aboriginal's identity. Colonial conception of land was 'a commodity' to be cultivated and brought to their use. But, in the course of time, majority of settlers gradually transformed their ideology and feel psychological connectedness with the land they owned. Their part-Aboriginal successors accepted and furthered that legacy to the next generations. That is why, protagonist Lily Barton relates her being partially Aboriginal to the connectedness to country in the following words,

“...In accepting my family connection here it means I am acknowledging that I am part Aboriginal...It is the whole idea of belonging...I find sense of peace I don't find

anywhere else; that is because there is a sense of sharing and teach me the ceremonies, the kinship with them and the part of the country..." (Morrissey Di 197-198)

When Sami questioned her that where do part Aboriginals fit in the society, she replied in a roundabout way that one has to pay the price where one is born. Perhaps Lily is denoting a cultural, traditional, ethnic assimilation policy sponsored by the government in which settlers and partially white community have to abandon some of their rights to Aboriginals for peaceful co-existence in the modern Australian multicultural social structure.

Conclusion:

Di Morrissey presents the development of Australia from Eurocentric cultural society to multicultural community through this novel. The nation has barely two hundred year's history. However, it is very interesting to observe its development from European penal colony to a nation of potential strength. People of various decent have contributed to the development of Australia. Australia's minority cultures contributed extensively to its contemporary national identity. The author seems to assume that national identity is a kind of national essence that exist in a very fabric of nation's land, culture and people. National identities are most usefully conceptualized as widely circulating discourses of national belonging; representations of what a nation is and is not. Nations are rationally constructed. We are in some sense bound together by our shared symbolic system. In the novel the presentation of rituals, landscapes and artefacts, songs and dance performed by the natives are sufficient proof of that.

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