

AUSTRALIAN LITERARY CRITICISM

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Abstract

The Australian literary criticism has focused mostly on the gender issues, preferably the discrimination of women in the society. However, critics are not only biased in their work based on their gender, but also fail to agree on the most appropriate method of critiquing; individual or collective. This is unlike Indonesian critics where they embrace communal criticism as it contributes to positive change to the society. The failure to have clear-cut perspective on which criticism method should be appropriate shows that there is a significant gap that needs to be filled, thus necessitating the current study.

Keywords: *gender, individual, collective, communal, criticism*

Introduction

The role of authors of literary materials in the society is to present social, political, economic, and cultural issues in their works. The objective is to trigger the need for a change at an individual or community level. On this basis, there are many themes that authors focus on such as love, bribery, crime, violence, among others. In the Australian context, cultural and gender issues are some of the common themes in the literature. On the other hand, critics of literature take various positions on the same or different subject matters.

Unlike the Indonesians, Australian critics have mostly concentrated on the gender and discrimination of women as their main topic of criticism, especially when analysing the works of Barbara Baynton and Miles Franklin. The following paper seeks to analyse the Australians' criticism of Baynton's "Bush Studies" and "Human Toll", as well as Franklin's "My Brilliant Career" and "My Career Goes Bung". Although there are different scholars' works used in this review, the paper will focus on five researchers: Prasanna Sree, Sheridan, Schaffer, Res and Watson. The objective of the paper is not only to assess

the extent of criticism of gender and discrimination in the works of the two authors, but also to determine the gap that needs to be filled in terms of the individual and collective perspectives toward Australian literature critique.

Criticism of Baynton's and Franklin's Works

For decades, until 1980s, there was no significant limelight given to the gender issues or the criticism concerning how Australian women were being represented and depicted in the literature. Prasanna Sree (2018) notes that the works of Baynton remained unknown in the Australian literary world until the early 80s, when feminist criticism started taking shape. However, he notes that Baynton remains to be one of the most influential women writers in Australia (Prasanna Sree 2018). In his observation, Sheridan (2017) argues that although Baynton may be seen to have contributed in the women writers' empowerment, she was only a typical female writer who was not only able to make use of her natural talent, but also unable to control personal emotions.

Important to underscore is that for a long time, most of the critics of Baynton works concentrated on the identification of the elements of her autobiography with the

aim of piecing together her life, instead of contextualizing her thematic meaning into what was happening in the society. According to Sheridan (2017), gender and women discrimination were some of the main themes that Baynton was propagating in her collection, "Bushes Studies". On this basis, Baynton needs to be seen as a sophisticated writer who made use of obliqueness since it was the only type of criticism that was open for criticising among the Australian women writers at her time, unlike being termed as natural writer that failed to extend her talent to symbolism. According to Prasanna Sree (2018), the apparent inability of critics to ensure that they are engaged implicitly in the Baynton's stories is pegged on their failure to appreciate and contextualize the life in the bush.

Since the beginning, Baynton's 'Bushes Studies' were subjected to the extensive male censorship and deliberately edited my other writers in order to not only serve their interests, but also render the implied conventional , thus making her stories conform to what was being perceived as the correct version of the Australian life. Schaffer (2015) observes that only a few of the Baynton's manuscripts have managed to survive the "onslaught". Although this is the case, Schaffer (2015)

argues that Baynton's main agenda in her *Bushes Studies* was to illuminate the gender issues, specifically bringing forth the discrimination that Australian women were facing. In the words of Sheridan (2017), Baynton should be considered as the Australian writing hero since within a decade where readers were preferring sentimentality and jokes on the hard-luck issues in the backblocks of Australian farming, she pushed directly and hard in showing the painful truths about what was happening in the society.

In supporting this, Prasanna Sree (2018) observes that it was the women of her generation that played a pivotal role in repudiating the daring male rejection in the Australian independence. Specifically, she notes that the fierce sketches from Baynton's works helped in exposing how women were suffering, which prolonged even after independence. Res (2016), avers that in "The Chosen Vessel", Baynton has shown women's perspective by depicting them as the victims of men's brutality as well as the men's stereotypical notions towards womanhood. According to Res (2016), Baynton also sought to illustrate that women have to fight for their space since men are as well as their enemies shown by the girl from the town in the "Chosen Vessel". The woman's husband

was angry when he realized that the wife was afraid of a cow. In this case, Baynton encourages women to cope with the situations and learn how to become independent. The same argument is made by Tonkin et al. (2014) who posit that women from all levels have to deal with victimization as observed in Bush Church's married women, as they experience harassment from their husbands. In the "Squeaker's Mate", Baynton sought to illustrate how women are discriminated in the decision making process, including on the "mateship" agenda.

On the other hand, Watson (2015) notes the theme of gender and women portrayal in the Australian society is also emphasized in the Miles Franklin's "My Brilliant Career". In this autobiographical book, Franklin seeks to illustrate, through Sybylla, the difficulties that women undergo as they try to make ends meet. Tonkin et al. (2014) has of the view that the book empowers women to make well informed decisions, especially when choosing one's career life. Watson (2015) argues that women should use the Sybylla's experience as a lesson that in many occasions, determinations that are beyond a person may change fortunes and attitude.

Although the novel is mostly about women and decision making, Res (2016) asserts that the book also shows that men can experience the difficulties as illustrated at the Tiger Swamp Public School where the teacher is struggling against ignorance, isolation, and indifference. As in the case with the women, the teacher is not accorded any encouragement or sympathy from even his school inspector. In this way, Tonkin et al. (2014) notes that “My brilliant Career” is an ironic book based on its title since the career journey of the character is not brilliant, but rather full of tragedies. Watson (2015) supports the argument that unlike some of the women writers who concentrate on the gender discrimination, Franklin shows neutrality in addressing the gender debate. However, Watson (2015) fails to refer to other works that Franklin has written in making this conclusion. According to Res (2016), it is arguably correct to oppose the perceived notion that this novel sought to focus on the female gender and the aspect of discrimination against women. Instead, Res (2016) has the view that the objective of this work was to show that individuals are not always masters of their destiny and that when people decide to try and exercise their wishes, the outcome may not only

become unpleasant to them, but also lead to unhappiness.

Notably, most of the critics of Franklin’s work agree that “My Career Goes Bung” is the sequel to the “My Brilliant Career” (Prasanna Sree 2018). According to Tonkin et al. (2014), the former work was written as the response to notoriety and fame that she got after the publication of the latter in 1901. As the main character, Sybylla Melvyn is depicted as the heroine in both novels. Watson (2015) is of the view that the fact that Sybylla lived in a bush station most of her life is enough to understand the intention of Franklin: to show the suffering of women and the extent of their discrimination in the society. However, he quickly adds, that Franklin also intended to illustrate how religious Australian women are compared to their men counterparts, and that their creator was the only refugee Watson (2015). The frustration of women in the novel is clearly stated when Sybylla refers to what her mother used to tell her that, “All girls wished that they were men”. (Tonkin et al 2014). Although Sybylla feels reluctant to accept that reality, her mother insists that at some point in life, she will also wish the same, thus signalling the suffering that women were undergoing in the lifetime.

Individual and Collective Criticism

In the Australian literature context, there is a clear tension between individual and communal perspectives. The dominance of men critics in providing observation on the thematic, techniques, and contextualization of literary works have made personal perspective be prioritised as opposed to the communal one Watson (2015). Although this is the case, there is no clear-cut agreement on which perspective should be universally accepted in the Australian literary criticism world. According to Tonkin et al. (2014), the empowerment and sensitization of women writers and critics before the end of the twentieth century played an important role in providing an almost equal force that would counter the male counterparts.

Watson (2015) observes that although it is clear that women have undergone suffering, an individual woman's challenges and difficulties in life cannot be generalized as a communal phenomenon or problem. According to him, there is a need to conduct more research to understand the extent of every aspect represented in the literature, especially by women writers, in order to ascertain its scope in the society. However, women critics such as Tonkin et al. (2014) note

that while most of the men critics prefer individualized criticism, and that they recommend studying the extent of women issues raised in literary works, they have not taken steps to conduct research in order to ascertain the claims made by the writers and female critics.

In the Indonesian criticism, the critics agree that the most preferred method of critiquing literature should be a collective process. Consequently, this helps to create and develop strong cultural and social values, thus enhancing community progress. Watson (2015) argues that perhaps the main contributing factor to the individual criticism of literature in the Australian context is the widespread capitalism, where people compete against each other, thus lacking collective approach towards various issues. However, Res (2016) observes that even if this could be the case, the empowerment of women critics in the late twentieth century and early twenty - first century cannot be ignored.

Another difference between Australian criticism of Franklin's and Baynton's works and the Indonesian literary critique is based on the thematic areas. While Indonesians have taken a diversified approach toward criticizing literary works,

Australian critics have focused on the gender and discrimination aspects represented by the two female writers. Watson (2015) However, this does not mean that there are no similarities in the themes covered by the writers from both Australia and Indonesia. For example, freedom of religion and expression are manifested in both cases.

The Gap and the Solution

As noted above, Australian critics have focused on the gender and discrimination issues when analysing Franklin's and Baynton's works. The aspect of gender should be highly considered when analysing the level and scope of literary criticism, especially when the main topical issues affect both male and female authors and writers. The literature review has revealed that most of the critics of the two writers are men, thus creating the possibility of bias and lack of objectivity in criticism. Therefore, the tension develops between male and female critics, leading to the disagreement.

While many of the critics agree that Australian women have not only undergone suffering and discrimination, there is no consensus on whether the impact of what women are experiencing should be collectively or individually

studied. If this is the case, the question of which form of criticism takes precedence should as well be answered. In order to address this gap, there is need to conduct a study in order to determine if in the Australian context, critics should focus on collective or individual criticism. The objective of the study is to reduce the tension noted above as well as highlighting the benefits of focusing on either of the two forms of criticism.

Conclusion

The Australian literacy criticism has focused mostly on the gender issues, preferably the discrimination of women in the society. However, critics are not only biased in their work based on their gender, but also fail to agree on the most appropriate method of critiquing; individual or collective. This is unlike Indonesian critics where they embrace communal criticism as it contributes to positive change to the society. The failure to have clear-cut perspective on which criticism method should be appropriate shows that there is a significant gap that needs to be filled, thus necessitating the current study.

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