



GENDER ISSUES IN BARBARA BAYNTON'S *BUSH STUDIES*

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ABSTRACT

This research attempts to address how an Indonesian critic would interpret gender in postcolonial Australian literature in *Bush Studies*, a short story written by Barbara Baynton. Using French feminism, this writing focuses on how Indonesian critics regard gender issues in postcolonial Australian literature and how Indonesian critics understand it. Furthermore, how Baynton's and Franklin's works challenge the status quo is investigated, and how Indonesian and Australian points of view deal with class and gender concerns when reading these works. For that purpose, close reading becomes a literary research method to understand the very details of the short story. The original contribution that this research would make to this field of expertise will involve exploring how different cultures examine literature and media from cultures not their own, especially as Indonesia and Australia, though both patriarchal, are very different cultures that approach gender differently.

Keywords: gender, Barbara Baynton, *Bush Studies*, Australian literature

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, males and females are typically seen as binary, that is to say, strictly male for those born male and strictly female for those born female, which is how they are treated culturally in years to come. Legally, males and females are assigned their genders at birth, regardless of later expression, to which they are expected to adhere throughout life, both socially and legally. If we were to apply feminist gender theory in literary criticism, many different angles and aspects could be studied from an Indonesian perspective studying Australian literature. Feminist gender theory of biological sex versus gender expression states that some aspects of gender are inherent, but also much that is cultural and sociological. When studying literature, this means that aspects of social and cultural upbringing in the critic may not always apply to literature being studied from another culture that socializes girls and boys differently (Bertens, 2007).

If critics approach the evaluation of literature from a feminist gender theory perspective, this would mean that the critic uses the principles and ideology of feminism, precisely French

feminism, to critique work utilizing the language of literature. This would include evaluating the various ways in which literature continues to promote the idea of male dominance in society by analyzing the various ways that patriarchy is presented socially and economically within the literature (Kirkby, 1989; Radway, 2009; and Hall, 1996). For example, an Indonesian critic would likely see the roles of bush women depicted in Baynton's *Bush Studies* as being more in line with the *calalai* or *calabai*, genders where women with more masculine traits are noted for doing more masculine work, as bush women were often required to do. (Budianta et al., 2017). In the Bugis society of Southeastern Indonesia, five genders are recognized: *makkunrai*, *oroané*, *bissu*, *calabai*, and *calalai*. The Calalai are trans men, the calabai are trans women, and the bissu are androgynous shamans. The makkunrai are women, and the oroane are men as traditionally understood according to gender.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research applies close reading as its literary research method. Close reading is a deep analysis of how a literary text works; it is both a reading process and something one includes in a literary analysis paper, though in a refined form. It is a method of literary analysis that focuses on the specific details of a passage of text to discern some deeper meaning present in it. The meaning derived from the close reading is the researcher's interpretation of the passage or text.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Simone de Beauvoir argued that it is impossible to critique literature without bias and that social norms, culture, and politics will always play a role, regardless of efforts to counter them as restrictive to the development of women, emotionally and psychologically. (Allen, 2017) Typically, Australian literature is viewed through the Euro-centric framework of Western thought on gender, and thus the politics of these cultures play a role in how literary works are approached. However, from an Indonesian perspective, the political connection to gender is different from a culture born of a Euro-centric background. It is assumed that the multi-gendered culture of Indonesia would assign different political values, if any, to Australian literary works regarding gender (Bertens, 2007).

Indonesian readers or readers with Indonesian culture, with its un-gendered language and five recognized genders in a society like in Bugis, would likely understand Western concepts of gender to be limiting, as many non-binary individuals in Western societies often find themselves trying to fit imperfectly into a concept of male or female with no variation

between the two, but by which the fit will be imperfect (Schaffer, 1988). Baynton's *Bush Studies* challenged an existing gender ideal of the white male of the bush, which was seen by European-based Australian society as the ideal to strive towards for the Australian male, and the stories of women were not essential or considered as part of this narrative. (Schaffer, 1983) As Schaffer (1983) says, "In order to understand woman's inscription in the national mythology, we need to analyze instances of the man's struggle for identity. However, as we investigate this Australian character who comes to represent the nation, we see that it is founded on particular notions of femininity or the 'feminine.' Actual figures of this aspect do not appear with regularity in the discourse on national identity...." An Indonesian critic, coming from a cultural tradition where gender enjoys a broader definition than it does in the Australian culture, would most likely notice the absence of the feminine perspective in traditional Australian writings by men and question the one-sided nature of the bush narrative.

In *Bush Studies*, Baynton demonstrates various aspects of French feminism, which would later be espoused in French feminism and its approach to literary criticism, in challenging the male bush myth's status quo and preliminary aspects of eco-feminism. Men control and own the land in Western patriarchal ideologies, just as they "own" and control women. The men of the Australian bush often see the land as something to conquer, own, and control, and this has been many of the same ideas behind the subjugation of Australian women. A similar ideology is seen in American and British culture. Both the land and women are exploitable, existing only to further the goals and accomplishments of a man, and therefore changing the attitudes towards man's place within nature often serves to change attitudes about women. French feminism approaches philosophical notions of the place of women through philosophy and literary works, as does Baynton in her works, with much feminist literary criticism working on challenging the notions of patriarchy in society by including the feminine perspective, as Baynton attempted in *Bush Studies*. The French feminists radically claimed that all western languages are utterly and irredeemably male-engendered, male-constituted and male-dominated. Changes in the status of women, therefore, are brought about by changes in literature and philosophy in the portrayal and esteem of women, and Baynton's work attempted this by demonstrating the contributions of women to live in the bush, as well as the dangers they faced which were rarely addressed in literature written by men (Kirkby, 1989).

Let us consider some of the work demonstrated by Baynton in *Bush Studies* in terms of gender and class. Baynton's work was critical of patriarchal attitudes towards women and their contributions to life in the Australian outback. The lack of recognition and the assumption that

women did not contribute significantly to life in the outback was heavily challenged in Baynton's stories of women living in the frontier. She goes so far as to suggest that bushmen, far from being the mythical epitome of manliness that white Australian society suggested, were quite brutal, shiftless, or outright lazy. In the story "Squeaker's mate" in *Bush Studies*, Baynton describes the life of a woman living with a man named Squeaker. Squeaker's mate, "the best long-haired mate that ever stepped in petticoats," is a hardworking, taciturn woman, Mary, whose mate, Squeaker, is a good-for-nothing. Here is paragraph three: "She took the ax and ring-barked a preparatory circle from the bag while he looked for a shady spot for Billy and the tucker-bags" (Baynton et al., 1965).

Squeaker himself does not seem to have much wrong with him other than laziness, though his woman is said to be very tolerant of him. However, when a fallen tree injures her, Squeaker's reaction is less than sympathetic. He is irritated because it means he will have to get up and work at everything himself, such as dealing with the sheep by himself and other manual labor to which he was accustomed to letting her do, in direct opposition to the myth of the bushman being a literary hero of noble nature and strong work ethic. It is not until the near end of the story that we even learn her name is Mary, demonstrating how little value she is to Squeaker as a person. The only one who shows her any sympathy is her loyal dog, again indicating the dismissiveness which bush women often faced, in that the only respect they often received was from children and animals and not the men in their lives. The story chronicles Squeaker's self-centered lack of interest in his mate's condition, often leaving her for days without provisions, and his abandonment of her hardly in keeping with the myth of the bushman as a masculine role model to aspire. Mary is not well-liked by other local women, who seem to instruct their husbands not to bother with her, and no hero shows up at the last moment to save the day for her.

Interestingly, Baynton uses "mate" to describe Mary rather than wife, girlfriend, or some other form of address that dignifies her as a person. She is Squeaker's "mate" in the sense that she is his significant other, but not in the entire healthiness of a marriage that comes with the term "wife." Furthermore, in the Australian culture, "mate" also means friend and can be applied to acquaintances of either the same or opposite sex as the person. However, in this story, Mary is not even Squeaker's friend it would seem, for the concept of "mateship" in the bush is that of cooperation and trust and friendship between bush people who rely on each other for survival. Despite the designation of "mate," Mary is not even given this dignity in this story. Eventually, she is moved to a shed. Squeaker replaces her with a barmaid as his new

significant other. She is forced to suffer the indignity of watching another woman take her place as she waits to die from neglect. Mary goes from a competent and resourceful woman to disabled, discarded, and forgotten, her body no longer her own. The story is ironic, heartbreaking, and challenges any notion of noble, competent masculine bush man superiority and heroism. In this way, Baynton confronts gender issues by pointing out the hypocrisy and lack of realism in the bushman mythos while also demonstrating the contributions of women.

In "Bush Church," Baynton's tone takes a more comic approach, though no less ironic. There is much vernacular dialogue to muddle through for the reader, which can cause a loss of meaning in the reader who is not familiar with the rhythm of the language as a primary language. The story follows a traveling parson and the colorful crew of locals he encounters. As church services are rare in these parts, the parson encounters unmarried couples, unchristened children, and people who had never been to church before. The story is comedic and less stressful than other stories in work in that there is a lack of the brutality and violence often depicted in the other stories. However, the comedy is bitter, and the bush people are not noble as myth would have them be. The residents are not hospitable and seem to be looking for ways to con or mooch off the traveler.

The story has no moral. Instead, it reads more as a demonstration of everyday happenings in the bush and the sort of people one might encounter, including wife-beater Ned and unmannerly children who lack standard social norms. In writing this story, Baynton seems to have less to say about the suffering and everyday life of bush women and instead chooses to demonstrate what life is like in the bush from the perspective of these women. Australian society had esteemed mythological images of bushmen, their ability to conquer and live off the land, and the complete lack of female contribution to this way of life. However, in this story, Baynton demonstrates that pioneer life in the bush was indeed populated by women who engaged in boring, everyday activities, but that bush families were living less than enviable lives. Due to lack of resources and connect with larger urban centers of culture, religion has little part in their daily lives, social norms are ignored, and families form or are broken apart with little governmental and societal influence. Such things would have been considered horrific when these stories were written, scandalous even, though less so in the rural lower classes than in the upper classes of urbanized areas.

Perhaps the most well-known story from "Bush Studies" is the short story "The Chosen Vessel." In this story, a bush woman with a baby is alone in her home when a swagman happens. She tells him that her husband is sick, which she always tells people when her husband is gone.

We never learn the woman's name, as Baynton often said that "Women are nameless in the bush," only that she is originally from town and unfamiliar with bush life, that her husband is frequently absent and non-attentive to his family, and that she is isolated and desperate. She is stalked by a swagman who eventually rapes and murders her, despite her efforts to keep herself and her child safe. This horrific crime could have been prevented by a passerby, Peter Hennessey, who is a very religious young man sneaking off to vote in an election against the wishes of his priest and mother and witnesses the woman running towards him with her child. Thinking he sees a religious vision, he rides away without stopping to help, demonstrating how his superstition and religion resulted in the woman's death. His mistake is later explained to him by his priest.

The story deals with superstition and religion, demonstrating the deadly consequences of these things running unchecked in the human psyche. Baynton seems to warn against allowing religion to cloud rational thought and common sense in the face of danger. In a man's story, a woman's point of view is rarely considered. The gender roles assigned to women from Australian culture would say that the woman was supposed to be a good mother and wife, never contradictory and never afraid of her role and place, as was common during the colonization of Australia well up into the twentieth century (Radway, 2009). However, in this story, the woman is afraid of life in the bush, afraid of men, and takes extreme measures to protect herself, which ultimately come to nothing. Her husband does not protect her, as Australian culture suggests he would if he were a "true" bushman, and not so dishonorable in leaving his wife behind, dismissive of her fears and concerns. The woman's voice is also stolen from her. She remains silent as the swagman invades her home, and the only time she uses her voice is cut off as she meets her demise at the hands of the man.

The story is a better presentation of Australian culture than the ideal of the Australian legend presented in most other works from the time. (Baynton et al., 1965) Writers such as Henry Lawson barely acknowledge the danger for women and children in the bush. (Shaffer, 1988) Baynton's story includes the woman as a person and not as an object or simple background character. Baynton does not accept what now appears to be the false representation of the legend but instead challenges the nationalist myth of the pure, unsullied bush and the men who inhabited it. Baynton painted a world of harsh masculine domination, brutalized relationships, and terrifying sexual violence.

Manneke Budiman, a professor of literary studies at the University of Indonesia, had much to say about feminism in Islamic culture, and his postulations on feminism in a patriarchal

culture would likely have much application to Baynton's writings. He states that "Critics must learn to see authors as contemporary philosophers who work to produce new thoughts and ideas about the nation such as what past authors did in the 1920s, 1930s, and to the 1950s and 1960s." (Hioe, 2018) In this way, Budiman would likely approach Baynton from an Indonesian perspective by first accepting that her role as a contemporary author of the time was to present a philosophical understanding of feminism from the standpoint of telling the stories of women that are otherwise untold and dismissed by the dominant culture leading to an incomplete image of life in the Australian bush at the time. Budiman believes that the purpose of literary criticism is to build bridges between two standpoints that would otherwise not meet. In this case, Baynton's work does precisely this in bridging the gap between the female experience of the bush to the male mythology, where somewhere in the middle, the two meet in the reality of the situation, not the mythological one.

In reality, bush women had to adopt specific characteristics thought of as expressly male to survive: toughness, resourcefulness, and hardworking resourcefulness. Thus, Schaffer (1988) points out that women of the bush leave certain feminine gender aspects behind to live in the bush. Budiman would point out this flexibility of gender norms, in the female adopting the masculine, while also pointing out that women do still retain their feminine nature, that of caring for their children and maintaining the home, which serves both patriarchies in keeping female gender roles while expressing feminism in adopting masculine roles. In Indonesian culture, this is not so strange given the various genders expressed in Indonesian culture like in Bugis culture but is somewhat unusual in Western-based societies.

CONCLUSION

Through *Bush Studies*, Barbara Baynton criticizes patriarchal attitudes towards women and their contributions to life in the Australian outback. The lack of recognition and the assumption that women did not contribute significantly to life in the outback was heavily challenged in Baynton's stories of women living in the frontier. Baynton's work does precisely this in bridging the gap between the female experience of the bush to the male mythology, where somewhere in the middle, the two meet in the reality of the situation and not the mythological one.

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