



A Glimpse into the Twentieth Century Australian Women Novelists

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Abstract

Australian literature is the literary work produced by the people of the Commonwealth of Australia. It is unique because of the country's distinct landscape, culture, and Aboriginal heritage. Australian writers who are widely acclaimed and highly honoured include the Nobel Prize winning author Patrick White, as well as Christina Stead, David Malouf, Peter Carey, Thomas Keneally, Colleen McCullough, Morris West, Nevil Shute, etc. Though there are many male Australian authors of great repute, there is a galaxy of women Australian writers who have left their indelible mark in Australian literature in the twentieth century. They provide a unique perspective on the female experience within the Australian context. The aim of the paper is to throw some light on the Australian women novelists of the twentieth century by highlighting their major themes, characterization, narrative techniques, etc.

Keywords: Women Novelists, Feminist, Australian Society, Australian Landscape,

Aboriginal, Race, etc.



Introduction

Australian literature encompasses written works produced in Australia, largely shaped by the country's unique geography, history of colonization, and Aboriginal culture. The first published novel in Australia was *Quintus Servinton : A Tale Founded upon Incidents of Real Occurrence* (1831) by Henry Savery, an English-born convict serving time in Hobart.

Nineteenth century Australian novels typically featured themes of colonialism, convict life, pioneering experiences in the harsh Australian landscape, exploration narratives, a focus on the "bush" environment, and often depicted the development of a distinct Australian identity, frequently excluding Aboriginal perspectives due to the "terra nullius" legal concept, while often showcasing a masculine perspective on settlement and hardship.

In the first half of the twentieth century, poetry was more popular in Australia and the second half saw the novel rising to prominence. Twentieth century Australian novels were marked by a shift towards exploring complex themes of national identity, the Australian landscape, the impact of colonialism, and the Aboriginal experience. The prominent male Australian novelists like Patrick White, Thomas Keneally, and David Malouf used rich imagery and modernist techniques to delve into the complexities of Australian life. They often focused on the harsh outback environment and the struggles of individuals within it. White's *The Tree of Man* (1955), *Voss* (1957), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), etc. showcased the Australian psyche through expansive, symbolic narratives, while Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982) addressed the Holocaust through an Australian lens. While male Australian novelists in this century wrote with the lens of masculinity, women Australian novelists used a feminine angle.



Anna Maria Bunn was the first woman novelist to have published in Australia. Her novel *The Guardian: A Tale Told by an Australian* was published anonymously. Ever since this path-breaking event in 1838, women have been writing themselves into the cultural history of the nation. Rosa Praed is considered the first Australian-born novelist to achieve a significant international reputation.

Women's Writing from 1900 to 1950 can be termed as '**Representative Writing**'. Some of the notable women literary figures who belonged to this period are Mary Fullerton (1868-1946), Henry Handel Richardson (1870-1946), Marie Bjelke Petersen (1874-1969), Miles Franklin (1879-1954), Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883-1969), Jean Devanny (1894-1962), Eleanor Dark (1901-1985), Jean Campbell (1901-1984), Dymphna Cusack (1902-1981), Christina Stead (1902-1983), Kylie Tennant (1912-1988), Dorothy Hewett (1923-2002), etc. Their works reflected the suffrage movement, as well as the effects of Federation, two World Wars, increasing industrialisation and urbanisation, women entering the workplace, and emergent discourses of sexuality and psychology. New subject formations were taking place around gender, race, and nationalism.

Elizabeth Jolley has described the 1980s as a '**moment of glory**' for the woman writer in Australia: the 80s were indeed a phase in the national literary history when women writers and readers entered the mainstream. Thea Astley typifies 80s as a '**decade of the minorities**'. The traditional oppositions (imperial centre and the continent) and Eurocentrism which had organised Australian literary production was displaced to allow space not only for the experience of women but also a marked sense of regional, ethnic and class-based difference. In the anthology *Eight Voices of the Eighties* (1989) by Gillian Whitlock, Helen Garner (b.1942), Thea Astley (1925-2004), Jessica Anderson (1916-2010), Barbara



Hanrahan (1939-1991), Olga Masters (1919-1986), Kate Grenville (b.1950), Elizabeth Jolley (1923-2007) and Beverley Fanner are typified as riding the ‘crest’ of the wave of the 80s. But all these writers belong to the dominant white Anglo Celtic culture in Australia. Another anthology *Beyond the Echo: Multicultural Women’s Writing (1989)* by Sneja Gunew and Jan Mahyuddin was mentions writers such as Antigone Kefala (1931-2022), Sara Dowse (b.1938), Rosa Cappiello (1942-2008), Angelica Fremd (b.1944), Lily Brett (b.1946), Inez Baranay (b.1949), Ania Walwicz (1951-2020), etc. who belong to a much larger group of writers who write from a diversity of non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds. These writers offer new ‘Australias’; for they are writing from multicultural, non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Main Thrust

There are many women novelists in the twentieth century Australia who have gained critical appreciation both nationally and internationally. Following are the brief details of some of them:

Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883-1969) was an important novelist of the twentieth century Australia. She also wrote short stories, plays, and verse. Her novels prominently explore themes of Australian identity, the exploitation of Aboriginal people, particularly women, the harsh realities of working-class life in the outback, the power dynamics between white settlers and Indigenous Australians, and the complex relationships between people and land. She is best known for her novel *Coonardoo* (1929) which delves deeply into interracial relationships and the challenges faced by Aboriginal women in a colonial society. Her other novels include *Black Opal* (1921), *Working Bullocks* (1926), *Intimate Strangers* (1937), a trilogy set in the Western Australian goldfields: *The Roaring*



Nineties (1946), *Golden Miles* (1948), and *Winged Seeds* (1950), etc. Prichard often depicts the Australian landscape as a powerful and integral part of characters' lives, highlighting connection between people and the land. Her female characters often challenge traditional gender norms and demonstrate resilience in difficult circumstances. Prichard's writing often reflects her political views, advocating for social change and criticizing capitalist exploitation.

Eleanor Dark (1901-85) was a pioneer Australian woman novelist. She has left an indelible mark in Australian literature through her trilogy. *The Timeless Land* (1941) is the first volume in Dark's trilogy which also includes *Storm of Time* (1948) and *No Barrier* (1953). These novels trace the development of European settlement in Australia from 1788 to 1814. The trilogy is notable for Dark's attempts to acknowledge Australia's indigenous past and to include race conflict as a dimension of the settlement. *Storm of Time* covers the first five years of European settlement and also explores the relationship between Governor Phillip and Bennelong. Her writing also explores themes of social justice, environmental degradation, and the changing roles of women. Her works also document major events of the twentieth century such as the Great Depression and the Cold War.

Christina Stead (1902-83) was a prominent Australian novelist and short-story writer of the twentieth century who was known for her satirical wit and penetrating psychological characterisations. Her novels often explore the themes of love, marriage, freedom, and social and political critique. Her novels which are based on the theme of love and marriage are *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), *For Love Alone* (1944), etc. Her novels on social and political critiques are *The Beauties and Furies* (1936), *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), etc. She is generally regarded as a feminist writer, although she



shunned such a label. She was known for her political insights and firmly controlled but individual style.

Kylie Tennant (1912-88) was a notable Australian woman novelist of the twentieth century. She was also a playwright, short-story writer, critic, biographer, and historian. She was known for her realistic yet affirmative depictions of the lives of the underprivileged in Australia. Her first novel, *Tiburon* (1935), set in a New South Wales country town, accurately and sensitively describes life among the unemployed during the Great Depression. For her novels set in the slums of Sydney - *Foveaux* (1939), *Ride On, Strangers* (1943), and *Tell Morning This* (1967), Tennant lived in poor areas of the city and took jobs ranging from social worker to barmaid. Her novel *The Battlers* (1941) won the ALS Gold Medal in 1942. The novel was based on the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Thea Astley (1925-2004) has a significant place in Australian literature. She was a novelist and short story writer. Her novels and stories present a sceptical view of social relationships among ordinary people. She was concerned with all social injustice and seemingly developed her infamous piercing social criticism in order to make her views on various issues clear. Her novels *A Kindness Cup* (1974), *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968) and *Beachmasters* (1985) are based on postcolonial race relations. Astley was one of the first Australian novelists to take a critical, demystifying look at the violent colonial past. She examined satirically the lives of morally and intellectually isolated people in her native country. Her characters suffer from boredom, prejudice, and narrow-mindedness. Her women tend to be childish, her men either brutish or ineffectual.



Elizabeth Jolley (1923-2007) was an English-born Australian writer who holds a unique place in Australian literary canvas. Her works feature eccentric characters and examine relationships between women. They often draw contrasts between a stagnant Europe and a brash, vital Australia. *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983), is considered Jolley's funniest book and explores her two favourite themes - love between women and the contrast between the Old World and the New. In *Mr. Scobie's Riddle* (1983), set in a nursing home, outcast patients come to terms with their own alienation and imminent death. Her works are known for exploring themes of loneliness and the connections people make to alleviate it.

Kate Grenville (b.1950) is one of Australia's best known contemporary writers. Her novels explore themes of violence, class, gender, colonialism, human struggle to survive, etc. Her writing style is characterized by a clear, straightforward prose with a strong focus on character development and the exploration of complex historical themes. She often uses detailed imagery and a nuanced perspective to delve into the inner lives of her characters, particularly female experiences, while drawing heavily on research to create realistic historical setting. Her works are known for their feminist undertones and thoughtful examination of colonial Australia's social dynamics. *Dreamhouse* (1986), *Dark Places* (1994), *The Idea of Perfection* (1999), etc. are her noteworthy novels.

Conclusion

Australian women novelists of the twentieth century have been influenced by the various social, cultural, political and global events. As literature is often seen as a mirror of society, novels written by Australian women writers also portray the evolving Australian society, landscape and political atmosphere. Early women Australian novelists often focused



on domestic life and colonial experiences. Gradually they transitioned to more feminist and socially conscious themes in the mid-twentieth century and finally they embraced diverse voices and contemporary issues. Australian women novelists in the twentieth century are significant because they provide a unique perspective on the female experience within the Australian context, often exploring themes of gender roles, social issues, and national identity, while also challenging societal norms and paving the way for greater representation of women's voices in literature.

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