

Baynton's Realism vs. Lawson's Romanticism: *The Chosen Vessel* and *The Drover's Wife*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to highlight how different authors paint a picture of an Australian bush woman challenging the social conventions of female stereotype in the Down Under nation. To support, this article critically analyzes two Australian short stories, *The Chosen Vessel* by Barbara Baynton and *The Drover's Wife* by Hendry Lawson. Literature, in general, is dynamic and often a perfect discipline to deal with abstract ideas such as culture, race and gender and so on. It introduces new forms and techniques to meet consensus between two different opinions.

Key words: Australian Literature, Barbara Baynton, Hendry Lawson, *The Chosen Vessel*, *The Drover's Wife*

Australian literature, though a part of English tradition, has a unique perspective of its own. Representing "Australianess" has been a core concern for any Australian writer, especially the renowned authors like Baynton and Lawson. Still, they contrast each other over their perspective towards "unique Australian identity". So, this article, while tracing down the melodramatic aspects in these two short stories, the overall emphasis is laid upon how Baynton's realistic approach is quite contrast to the romantic approach adopted by Hendry Lawson in the portrayal of a bush woman. Finally, it concludes with a note of comment on the form and technique used in these short stories.

The later part of the nineteenth century and the first part of twentieth century marked as an important period in the history of Australia. It was during this period where the spirit of nationalism attained its peak and the people wanted to see Australia as an independent nation. It became possible with the rise of Australian literature with the contribution of three important writers Banjo Patterson, Hendry Lawson and Barbara Baynton, whose poems, short stories were well received by the public through the journal called Bulletin. Bulletin was a magazine that promoted everything which represented unique Australian identity. It also celebrated the unique culture, language, landscape and whatever became the identity of Australia. Usually, Australia is considered to be a man's land. The image that the white man associated with the bush continues to be an ideal understanding of bush life. One has to be a man or act like a man if he has to live alone in bush. And Lawson also partakes in this culture. While Hendry Lawson celebrates a woman who becomes a man like live in the bush, Barbara retorts against it saying that women have their own emotions and sentiments. She strongly asserts that she herself have unique experience to express.

Hendry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife* describes the life in the bush from a romantic perspective and Barbara Baynton's *The Chosen Vessel* gives a realistic picture of living in a bush. Lawson's story is always studied along with Baynton's story especially *The Drover's Wife*. But drover's wife occupies a central stage in the Australian tradition, while Barbara's story is labelled 'dissident' (*Women and the Bush* 137). Bush is a very unique theme in Australian literature. Lawson celebrates life in the bush and he has taken the bush as a major theme in all his poems and stories. Baynton though acknowledges the life in the bush is uniquely Australian but she says it is dangerous too. She had been living in the bush for seven years before divorced her first husband. And with her firsthand experience she describes life in the bush is a nightmare especially for woman. On the other hand, Lawson draws experience from his mother Louisa Lawson, as she has to stay with her children and farm since her husband is absent most of the times. So Louisa often encountered with problems in staying alone with her children without her husband at home. While Summer, a critic claims that *The Drover's Wife* is the story of Aunt Gilmore, Roderick disagrees, claiming that "Lawson said the story was modelled upon his aunt, Mrs. Job Falconer" (*Women and the Bush* 137). Like Barbara, Lawson also wanted to portray life in the bush but in a different way. So, the theme of their story is the same as both of them portrays the difficulty of bush woman staying alone with her children. Let's see where and how Lawson and Barbara contrast.

Portrayal of the Australian landscape: *Ideal vs. Real*

It is difficult to narrate any Australian text without connecting it to its landscape setting. Whether it is movie or a text, it starts with the description of the landscape because it is a part and parcel of Australian culture and their life style. Normally, Australian landscape is not something beautiful, everything is uniform and "the country is flat" (*The Drover's Wife*). Lawson describes his setting where only the "bush is all around – bush with no horizon" (*The Drover's Wife*). Around everywhere it is "the bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple – tress" and no sign for green vegetation at all. But the way he describes the setting shows his passion for Australian landscape. But he could sense that there is a "sign of civilization" (*The Drover's Wife*). In *The Chosen Vessel*, Barbara Baynton's bush setting is contrast to that of Lawson where "feed along the creek was plentiful" (477). And every day she finds "a fresh place to tether" her cow and its calf.

Lawson is not only glorifying the landscape in his story but also the major professions of Australia. Australians were during that time either drovers or squatters. A drover is a person who drove cattle for a long distances and maybe he is absent for a long period of time. It establishes a similar kind of lifestyle like the aborigines. The aborigines led a life of nomads. The nomads did not have a standard shelter and they move from place to place. The landscape made them shifting their places often. It was not meaningless to travel or transport often because they were not able to get food permanently at one particular place. They knew where to get what. Similarly, the drovers drove their cattle in large numbers have to feed them all. So drovers move from one place to another in search of feed and water for their animals. So they will be absent for a long time form their family.

The major threat in the bush: *Animal vs. Male*

In Lawson's story, the drover at first selected a land for farming and settled in "the two roomed home" in the bush. But his farming was not fruitful as there is "only a rotten native apple" (The Drover's Wife). Only then he tries a better profession that of droving. So he leaves his wife and children at home. He leaves his wife at home only to take care of the children and the land. So the bush woman is so responsible and they often think "how her husband would feel when he came home" (The Drover's Wife). Similarly in Barbara Baynton's *The Chosen Vessel*, the bush woman was left alone by her husband, who is a shearer by profession. Here again the loneliness of the bush woman is looked at differently by these authors. Always there is a threat lurking behind the bush woman to pounce on her. But the bush woman in *The Drover's Wife* is quite comfortable with her life as "all her girlish hopes and aspirations have long been dead" and "she is used to being left alone" for months together. In contrast, the bush woman in Baynton's story is not quite satisfied with her life living alone in the bush unlike the drover's wife because, "she had been a town girl" who is afraid of being alone.

In *Drover's Wife*, the threat is a snake whereas in *The Chosen Vessel* it is a swagman. This again is an attempt to show Australian settlement where animals enter into the living areas quite commonly. The entire scene is quite melodramatic in Lawson's story. At the moment the boy shouts, the mother goes in search of the stick and the dog Alligator. She is not only taking care of the child but also the dog which guards her house during her husband's absence. And the boy is also portrayed as enthusiastic and brave especially when he asks her mother "stand back! I'll have the beggar!" (15). This is very dramatic one as the boy of eleven years old "carrying a stick bigger than himself" (15). This is once again an evidence for Lawson's way of looking bush people always ready to face any kind of threat. But *The Chosen Vessel* portrays that only men are the bigger threat for bush woman when she is lonely. Baynton listed that the first threat is her husband who doesn't care for her. Second, the Swagman, one who killed her mercilessly and Finally, Peter Hennessey, who doesn't help to save her life and her children too.

Familial relationship: *Understanding vs. Misunderstanding*

It is not only in setting and uncertain bush life but these authors also have a very contrast approach towards the relationship between bush woman and her husband. Normally, the husband does not have very good understanding with bush woman which Barbara clearly shows through her realistic portrayal. In *The Chosen Vessel*, the wife often "thought of taking her baby and going to her husband" () but she abandoned the idea after her husband sneered and mocked at her saying "nobody would want to run away" with her. At times, he calls her "the noun was cur" (15). But Lawson does not believe that a woman is left alone at home when the husband goes for droving must not be a misunderstanding. He explains in his story where the bush woman says that her "husband is an Australian, and so is she" (12). Here, Lawson is emphasizing the pride that they are Australians. Though the drover is careless for sometimes "but a good enough husband" (16) for the bush woman. Lawson emphasizes very strongly the kind of understanding

between drover and the bush woman in his story. In *The Drover's Wife*, the bush woman has “not heard from her husband for six months” but she does not panic as she knows her husband “would take her to the city and her there like a princess” (16) after he returns from droving. Thus, Lawson breaks the stereotypical concept of calling bush life as misunderstanding one.

Life in the bush: *Miracle vs. Mythical*

While birth becomes a very difficult task in the bush, death can happen at any time. The survival is a miracle. The bush woman walked for nineteen miles “carrying a dead child” is described as an event in *The Drover's Wife* whereas the whole story is based on the death of the bush woman in Baynton's story. The predicament of the bush woman is the point Lawson made through his story and Baynton talks about survival through death. The reference to the religion in Lawson's story as a life giver and in Baynton's story, there is a reference to the Biblical myth. In Bible, The Chosen Vessel is Peter. He is chosen for Virgin Mary and Jesus to convey the message. The message is that one should not go against God. Here also the chosen vessel is Peter. Baynton refers to this to convey that how looking at things as an idea has resulted in the loss of life. She ironically hits at religion where a woman is called Virgin Mary, mother of Christ who is raped and murdered by a swagman towards the end. This is one example for several “literal and figurative meaning exists together in the text” (*Women and the Bush* 163).

Portrayal of the bush woman:

No name is given to the bush woman both in *The Drover's Wife* as well as in *The Chosen Vessel* because it refers to every bush woman. By doing this both writers are generalizing the statement in their own ways. Attributing masculine trait in full to the female character is the heart of Lawson's stories. But Baynton's short stories present “grim realism” which is quite opposite to the romantic approach of Lawson. The bush woman in Lawson story reaches a stick “whenever she hears a noise” (12). But Baynton's bush woman is “not one to provoke skirmishes even with a cow” (12). Every single action of the bush woman in *The Drover's Wife* captures the heroic deeds. Especially, when she fought a bush fire, “she put an old pair of her husband's trousers and bet out flames” (14). In the same way, once she fired the bullets at “a mad bullock that besieged the house” (15). Again, she dared a gallows – faced swagman, told him, “Now you go!” (115). But she failed when fought against flood because Lawson also know that “there are things that a bush woman cannot do” (16). Through this, Lawson suggests that “the bush woman can stand in place of her husband, lover or brother and take on masculine attributes of strength, fortitude, courage and the like in her battle with environment” (14). Above all, Lawson's bush woman not only physically strong but she has a strong psyche also.

Baynton does not accept that a woman can fight against bush fire and can succeed all odds waiting in the bush.

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