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Searching the “Self” through journey: Jessica Anderson’s *Tirra Lirra by the River*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explain the nature of multi – layered journey and its impact with the help of an Australian fiction *Tirra Lirra by the River* written by Jessica Anderson. It presents an analysis on the journey of Nora Porteous, the heroine in Anderson’s novel to highlight how journey makes a person to realize him/herself. Journey operates at different levels and does not restrict itself merely to a physical level alone. And often it becomes instrumental to explore the realities of life which results in acquiring knowledge and experience.

Key words: Jessica Anderson, Tirra lirra by the river, Searching self, Journey of Nora

Literature has contained within itself the seeds for one’s self – realization. It depicts multiple realities and urging the readers to select their path to explore. The text with overt descriptions of a physical journey alone might not help the readers to explore the realities. It could be achieved with the help of a text which presents multiple searches in a single journey. To support, this article examines a novel *Tirra Lirra by the River* written by an Australian writer Jessica Anderson. The award winning author from Down Under nation presents Nora Porteous, an old woman whose “globe of memories” goes to the journey which resulted in her self – realization towards the end. Anderson’s poetic narration portrays the journey of Nora, which is devoid of sentiment and duty bound is as equally adventurous as male’s.

Australia, though well known for several areas like sports, tourism, to name a few, it has also gained popularity across the world through its rich literary productions. Australian studies have been represented solely by its literature where other disciplines have failed to make their prominence in the world. As R.K.Dhawan observes in *Australian Literature Today*, “Australian studies overseas have been characterized chiefly by the study of Australian literature. There has been a growing interest in the study of Australia as a whole and Australian Literature, in particular” (6). Though Australian literature is a part of English literary tradition, it differs from literature of other English speaking countries both by its structure and theme. Australian literature is dynamic in its expression, representation and perception. Credits should go to Australian writers who have never missed a chance to represent their Australianess in any piece of their literary works. David rightly comments, “Australian authors develop new images of typical Australians” (9). In contemporary literary scenario, Australian writers offer the readers more insights into Australian Identity.

To read any Australian text one must have a proper understanding about the social, cultural and racial history of Australia. The history of Australia probably began with the travel account of an early explorer Lieutenant James Cook, who writes about Australia in 1770,

“the weather being clear, gave us good view of the country, which has a very pleasing appearance: it is of a moderate height, diversified by hills and vallies, ridges and plains, interspersed with a few lawns of no great extent, but in general covered with wood: the ascent of the hills and ridges is gentle, and the summits are not high”(Australian Literature 16)

This is the first and foremost document ever written to know about the history of Australia. Since then, many Australian writers took travel as their inseparable theme to address several issues like culture, gender and land. Thus, Journey became inevitable subject in the early part of Australian literature. The reasons are the majority of early Australian writers were white settlers and the denial of accepting aboriginal writers into the mainstream literature by Australian writers, also made Australian literature filled with the theme of journey. Neelima Kanwar observes in "Writing as Social Activism", "The mainstream Australian writings have negated the presence of Indigenous people and their works. The mainstream white writers do not recognize the literary productions of the Indigenous people as standards of/in literature”

Travel writing occupied the center stage in Australian literature. The writers especially women writers choose to venture into life and experience through fiction. They feel like getting more space in fiction to express their flow of thought. R.K.Dhawan says in *Australian Literature Today*, “The women writers of Australia have produced sufficient work to merit world-wide attention” and further he asserts that the tradition of realism offers women writers the possibility of exploiting female experience.

Jessica Anderson (1916 - 2010) was one of the important and enthusiastic writers in Australian literature. Her collection of works consists of fifteen short stories, six fictions and one historical novel. Among all, *Tirra Lirra by the River*(1978) received a wide appreciation both from her critics and readers as well. Above all, it won her the Miles Franklin award, one of the most prestigious awards for literature. She has emerged as one of the most realistic writers in contemporary Australian literature through her novels. She created the characters that expresses dynamic attitude towards culture, society, gender, relationship and also other complex issues existing in her country. Through her novels, Anderson inspired not only her contemporary writers but also the modern readers. While writing Anderson’s obituary Susan Sheridan, a young journalist paid a rich tribute in "Tirra Lirra and Beyond" , “Everyone I talk to remembers *Tirra Lirra by the River* as a wonderful book, sometimes even as a life changing one”. Elaine Barry, a critic argues in *Fabricating the Self: The Fictions of Jessica Anderson*, “It would be unfortunate if Jessica Anderson were to be remembered only for *Tirra Lirra by the River*, outstanding though it is. The books she published before and after it demonstrates an extraordinary range and depth of talent, within a relatively small compass” (1).

Tirra Lirra by the River narrates the events and incidents happened in the life of Nora Porteous, a seventy years old woman who has travelled a long way from London to Queensland, her childhood home. Now, she is the only surviving member of her family as her parents, brother and sister are all dead a long back. As she is lonely, suffering from pneumonia and bed ridden she is not able to control the spinning wheel of memory on present events instead she goes back and forth to her childhood days, young and middle ages subsequently. She tries to recall some incidents consciously as the other events of her life flows into her memory unconsciously which she calls“a globe of memory” (147) whereas Susan calls it as an ‘accidental flicks’ (*Tirra Lirra and beyond* 47). The story narrates the journey of Nora as a child, a young woman, a confident middle aged woman and an older woman. The readers concentrate on Nora’s physical journey alone

until she says, “My globe of memory has given one of its lighting spins, and I am dump founded not only by what it shows, but by the fact that it has remained on the dark side for so long” (*Tirra Lirra by the river* 147). This statement of Nora has made it clear that her journey is not merely a physical one but there have been a multiple journeys that run parallel to it.

Tirra Lirra by the River is then a journey of discovery. Discovering ‘self’ is the major focus which Jessica attempts to succeed through her protagonist Nora Porteous. Jessica presents a multi – layered journey through her poetic narration and well - crafted structure. Nora “sees herself as an explorer” (12), who explores to reach multiple objectives. She explores different landscapes, unsuccessful married life, discontent with the cultural restrictions imposed on women, relationship with other characters, sexual fantasies and artistic excellence by taking a Multi – layered journey.

Throughout the novel there is a reference to the landscape. Nora discovers herself very much with the landscape fancy. She says, “My other landscape absorbed me. And later, when I was mad about poetry, and I read *The Idylls of the King* and *The Lady of Shallot*, and so forth, I already had my Camelot” (*Tirra Lirra by the River* 18). Even as a young girl she is “in love with beauty” (20). Nora recalls her childhood incident, “One moonlit night, coming home across the paddocks from Olive Partridge’s house, I threw down my music case, dropped to the ground, and let myself roll into one of these clefts. I unbuttoned my blouse, unlaced my bodice, and rolled over and over in the sweet grass. I lay on my back and looked first at the noon, then down my cheeks at the peaks of my breast” (19 & 20)

Later, when Liza and Hilda responded to this incident saying, “you were looking for a lover” (20) Nora, though aware of the sexual nature of the incident that she was only “trying to match that region” to her mind, “Camelot” (21) For Nora, the region of her mind is miniature Camelot. The Victorian house in Potts Point in Sydney where she played a substitute for her own self by compressing all her fancy and artistic skills for her narrow minded husband Colin Porteous and conservative and urban mother – in – law Una Porteous. Though she has developed a strong affinity to Sydney only London life given her “the life of professional fulfillment” (13). Nora’s desire to experience the change, looking for new places and people broadens her horizon. She considers this as a way to take a journey to meet the reality.

Nora, considers marriage, as a socially acknowledged imprisonment for women. Having thoroughly enjoyed the landscape fancy in Brisbane, newly married Nora is forced to move to the Victorian house at Potts Point, Sydney. The life here, she described as “a metaphorical imprisonment” (11). She has lost herself completely and underplayed her role as an artist. Finally, her personal life came to an end with her husband’s divorce notice which shook her initially. Later, she recollected herself and begin to continue her life. But, after her divorce with Colin, she was unable to retain her true self completely as she is not able to break the social limitations imposed upon women. Her imaginations, fancy and artistic power are all destroyed by the conservative approaches of her contemporary society. She described it to Liza and Hilda saying, “I have come a long roundabout way..... to find out who I am” (124).

Exploring relationships is also a major theme to be discussed in *Tirra Lirra by the River*. Characters in this novel are typically represented to relate or to differ with the inner self of Nora. Each and every characters represent an aspect of Nora. Each character contributes in giving Nora a rich experience to know about herself. Nora does not have close relationship to anyone in this novel. She says, “My mother didn’t like me much” (24) and later she confessed, “I didn’t like her much either” (24). She identifies herself very much with Ida Mayo, a dress maker and Lewis, a homo sexual artist. Colin and Una Porteous act and repress her from realizing her identity. confinement. Fred, Liza, Hilda and Billy are performing as free and independent self of Nora. Throughout the novel Nora plays several personalities by identifying herself with other characters.

Nora dreams of sexual fantasy even when she is a child (the incident happened after she is returning from Oliver partridge’s house is the best example) but she came out of it completely after her bitter encounter with two incidents. At first when she is forced by the street boys for sex, she does not like the violent approach and made it clear, “in spite of my sexual excitement, imperative. I hated being pulled about and roughly handled. It made me bored and grieved and angry” (22) and another incident happened on shipboard in a brief time. Nora prefers for an abortion when she comes to know about her pregnancy. It makes her bleed for days where she decideds, “....never again did I have sexual contact, of any kind, with anyone” (38). Only after recollecting all her experiences so far, she carefully treads into a new path to take a journey, a journey of artistic fulfilment. After reaching London, Nora’s life as an artist becomes successful. She involves herself in designing embroidery patterns that becomes her passion of life. This embroidery making is similar to the

tapestry weaving of the Lady of Shallot. She sets up her own business in London as a dressmaker and also works as costume designer for the actors. Nora acquires independence from all social constraints and thus helps her to discover her 'self'.

From the above argument, it is clear that travelling is not simply a "movement from one place to another" (Travel, Travel Writing 654) or every day event as one believes. Travel is an act of making a platform for the mutual interaction between 'self' and outside world. It is a quest of searching for the 'self' beyond horizon. On the basis of this, Anderson, with first person narrator helps Nora to undergo Multi – layered journey to discover her true self.

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