

Claiming Space for Australian Women's Writing

Devleena Das and Sanjukta Dasgupta Edited

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NEELIMA KANWAR

Professor in English, ICDEOL, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla

Claiming Space for Australian Women's Writing edited by Devleena Das and Sanjukta Dasgupta is a significant contribution to the subject (as the title itself suggests) of Australian studies as well as women's studies. Although there are numerous literary works on and by women, this book stands apart from the rest because it explores and establishes the "exclusion of home writers from a predominantly phallogocentric" literary scene wherein the issues of women of colour together with white women come to the fore while studying their respective literary pieces. The book focuses on attributing visibility to Australian women's writing by highlighting them globally, outside the "confines of Australian academia" as the editors vociferously point out.

The editors in an adroitly written introduction trace the position of women's writings in Australia today, the global outreach of these writings, varied experiences of patriarchy and many such issues, all situated in the context of pastoral history, aboriginal-convict conflict, the "mateship", World wars, depression and naturalist fervour. Major writings, both fiction and non-fiction, like Mary Broome's 'Letters to Guy', Annie Beater's 'Memories of Past', Catherine Maslim's 'An Australian Girl', Greer's 'The Female Eunuch' to name a few have been discussed in detail. The *Introduction* while summarizing and commenting upon each essay also mentions pointedly that the purpose of the book is "how Australian women writers have crossed canonical, cultural and racial boundaries in search of identity and meaning" (p 4). There is also an engaging discussion on wide ranging themes like war, expatriation, nationality, identity, and so on, stressing on no single unilateral Australian woman tradition and "contesting androcentric hegemony".

There are eighteen essays in the book that are divided into four parts, viz., "Breaking the Silence", "A Space

of Her Own", "Scripting the Body and Sexuality" and "From the Margins" as respective titles. Part I aptly reflects on the subject of silence and its connotations. Fiona Murphy and Richard Nile while critiquing the position of Government in the times of war in Europe (1914- 1918) to silence the agony brilliantly put forth the maternal lament. Susan Sheridan explores the perennial dilemma of women artists- rigid order of family life or indiscipline of bohemian creativity especially within the unyielding structure of patriarchy. Devleena's essay ponders over gender equality while dwelling on rivalry, personal as well as artistic between Luisa Lawson and Mary Gilmore and also problematizes the term feminism. Next essay by Victoria Reeve like the earlier ones, addresses the complexities of women's writing's through Beatrice Grimshaw's travelogue and highlights the earlier white woman's perspective that reflected the stereotypical white male gawk on natives.

Part II begins with a magnificent essay by Sanjukta Das Gupta on writing as a part of activism. Das Gupta traces the feminist writing of Australia from 1901 till contemporary times. Five women writers influenced by Marxist ideology are especially mentioned to highlight gender politics as well as aboriginal issues. Sue Kesson in the next essay discusses the social history of Australia while outlining the literary career of Kate Grenville focusing on Grenville's colonial history and fictional format. Taking this further Raymond Evan's "Disparate Visions" on Fath Richmond, Gwen Haswood and Judith Wright deals with class issues, education and the public domain. In an interesting essay, Belina Burns places the suburbia vis-à-vis city centric imagined narratives wherein feminine discontent in domestic realm is voiced. Jerrica White concentrates on letter writing traditions of Australian women- as their diaries, memoirs and verses.

She has stressed the role of these women as preservers of traditions, environment and regulators of alien cultures.

Part III focuses on challenging matters such as lesbianism, drug addiction and acceptance of one's sexuality without guilt and fear. Susan Hawthorne, in her essay while candidly professing about her own alternate sexuality critically reviews heterosexuality and demands latitude for them as they have been always commented and looked down upon disparagingly. Nyole Peouse in her essay worries about the urban young of Australia while dealing with drug abuse, cultural feminization and indeterminism reflective of certain sections of Australian society in Helen Garner's works. Damien Barlow while writing about Barbara Hanharan's autobiographical writings focuses on women's needs and desires in sexual relations. Barlow significantly foregrounds the naturalist myth with themes of female bonding that rejected the patriarchal control.

Part IV juxtaposes the writings of immigrant and Aboriginal Australian women writers. Six essays in this section seek riposte to trauma, miscegenation and nostalgia in the works of re-habilitated women. Anne Brewster, an established aboriginal writer while focusing upon the rage of aboriginals and their politico-aesthetics as dissent in her protest poetry raises a certain consciousness. Simultaneously the complex relationship of the white and aboriginal women is analyzed in relation to the domestic foray. Sibandu Chakraborty gives another perspective to Aboriginal poetry focusing upon Romaine Moreton's view on feminism especially the Aboriginal viewpoint. Chakraborty critiques the Pan Australian cohesive patriarchal system (white as well as Aboriginal) and "Eurocentric material feminism"

and compares them to the "organic feminism" of Aboriginals. Ishmeet Kaur sensitively analyzes the role of oral traditions in articulating the joys of struggles and victories of Aboriginal women. Kaur also analyzes their autobiographical and biographical narratives in this context. Her analysis of Jackie Huggin's *Aunty Rita* and Jeanine Leane's *Purple Thread* gives an unsullied view on the lines of considering mothers and grandmothers as subjects of their own discourse. Sanghamitra Dalal touches the complexities of 'being' and 'belonging' in a land adopted as a home in the Anglo- Indian Australian writer Patricia Pengilly's autobiographical reflections on gender, race, carnality, ethnicity, culture and religion. Ispita Sengupta brings to the fore Mary Luisa Skinner's ideas of identity politics and existential feminism. Finally the essay by Sharon Rondle discusses Chandani Lokuge's works wherein she defines transcultural space of Australia and emphasizes upon Australian women's writings that transcend all the borders of nation.

The book also gives a brief review of select writings of Australian women. *Australian Studies Now* edited by Andrew Hassam and Amit Sarwal, *Australian Studies: Reading History, Culture and Identity* edited by David Rustam, Deb Narayan Bandopadhyay and Shibnath Banerjee to name a few are analyzed. Definitely this assembled volume contributes significantly to research on Australian writings and is valuable for teaching too. Each essay makes a pertinent argument regarding varied concerns of Australian writings making this collected work a serious academic endeavor. In addition, credit goes to the publisher Palgrave Macmillan for an excellent production in terms of the cover page and the paper quality that made it a joy to read the book.