No Shelter for Outsiders: Questioning Australian National (Un)Identity in Two Contemporary Novels

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Abstract

As a former European colony and a settler society composed out of waves of diverse migration from all over the world, Australia has never had a simple relationship to notions of national identity. Originally patterned after 19th century European models of mythological nationalism, early discourses of national identity sought to canonize select places, people and abstract characteristics—most of which were almost exclusively Anglo-Celtic—as defining myths of ‘Australian-ness.’ However, in the second half of the 20th century amidst a period of intense demographic and cultural change, the Australian government officially adopted multiculturalism as the defining national policy, leading to debates which in turn have become a focal point in a lot of contemporary Australian literature, no more so than in the work of authors from non-Anglo ethnic backgrounds. These writers frequently chart the dilemmas faced by non-Anglo minorities who have long been present in Australia but who have not been fully represented within the available narratives of Australian national identity. This paper analyses two recent novels by Australian authors as representative examples of this trend. Brian Castro’s Birds of Passage (1983) portrays the non-Anglo immigrants’ hardship in trying to fit in to mainstream Australian society and the quandary of not being able to call Australia their true ‘home.’ Hsu Ming Teo’s Love and Vertigo (2000) further elaborates the second generation’s loss of identity in a sense that the main character can identify herself neither to Australia where she was born nor to Singapore from where her parents come. The readings are framed and supported by a critical interrogation of Jacques Derrida’s theory of hospitality and Ien Ang’s theory of ambivalent nature of hospitality. The findings show that Australian-Chinese people from past to present have been treated as outsiders to the mainstream society and their places in it are somehow ambiguous.

Key words: Australian novels, National Identity, Home, Brian Castro, Hsu Ming-Teo