

Thea Astley: Writing in Overpoweringly a Male Dominated Literary World

- Megha Trivedi

Thea Astley, a distinguished writer in Australian literature has received many awards for her fourteen novels and two collections of short stories. She has emerged as the most prominent woman writer in Australia in spite of the fact that she never received noteworthy attention. Astley has been awarded Miles Franklin Award- the most prestigious award for fiction for four times and has also earned the most outstanding Patrick White Award for the 'Life time Achievement in Literature' in the year 1989. Born in Brisbane in 1925, she was educated at All Hallows Convent and at the University of Queensland. She was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Queensland. She worked as a teacher for many years. She explained, "What else was there for an adult female Arts graduate just post-war to do but teach?" (Astley 4) She has also taught at Macquarie University in Sydney. She started writing while studying for her Bachelor of Arts at Queensland University but serious writing started at Queensland Country town as a lonely teenaged teacher.

She has attacked the philistinism and double standards of middle class small town life in many of his works. This paper is an attempt to explore different themes in the novels of Thea Astley. Her novels include *Girl with a Monkey* (1958), *A Descant for Gossips* (1960), *The Well Dressed Explorer* (1962), *The Slow Natives* (1965), *A Boat of Home Folk* (1968), *The Acolyte* (1972), *A Kindness Cup* (1974), *An Item from the late News* (1982), *Beach Masters* (1985), *Reaching Twin Rivers* (1989) *Slow Nature* (1990) and many more. Her short stories are collected in *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (1979) and *Its Raining for Mango*. (1987) According to Susan and Genomi, (2008) Thea Astley was "the only woman novelist of her generation to have won early success and published consistently throughout the 1960s and 1970s, when the literary world was heavily male-dominated". (Susan and Genomi 1) In an Interview with Robert Drewe, of 'The Age' she has narrates her journey of writing different novels. She mentions:

Girl with the Monkey is about my last days at Townville and all its action takes place in one day. Anyway, it got a favorable mention in a national literary competition and Angus and Robertson's published it. Then I got what Hal Porter calls 'Print Fever' and nothing could stop me. I whipped into 'Descant for Gossips', 'The Well Dressed Explorer' and 'The Slow Natives' followed... I wrote, 'Girl with

the Monkey' in nostalgia, 'Descant for Gossips' in anger, and 'The Slow Natives' in misery. I work my plot out very easily in the piece and then it's just a game. I write the scenes that appeal to me first, regardless to where they come in the story. Then I fill in the missing bits. (The Age 12)

In Past, her writing style received unfavorable and critical response. She was first appreciated by Brian Mathew in the 'Life in the Eye of the Hurraicane: The Novels of Thea Astley'. He has noted: "Ashley's first five books appeared at a time when it was a lonely business to be a woman writer in Australia." (Mathew 148-73) Thea Astel received critical acclaim for most of her works but unlike writers like Patrick White, David Malouf, Peter Carey and other Australian fiction writers she did not received popularity. Elaine Lindsay in *Rewriting God: Spirituality in Contemporary Australian Women's Fiction* elaborates:

Twenty five years later, there are still comparatively few major Australian essays on Astley's work and no essay collections or critical or biographical studies have been published. Unlike Elizabeth Jolley, Astley has attracted little attention from post-modernistic, post-colonialist, post-structuralist or feminist critics, although her books have been reviewed extensively in literary magazines and newspapers in recent years and has been well served in literary competitions. (Lindsay 142)

She is widely praised for her narrative techniques, plot structure, the extraordinary use of wit and satire on the role of Catholicism in everyday life. Her plots are full of striking dramatic effects and exciting climax. Astley has often articulated her views by writing as a helpless outsider. All the works of Astley reflects Colonial history and the desolation caused by Colonialism. In an interview with Robert Drewe in Sydney, she has explained that:

I had a strict Catholic background; perhaps that's why I'm so interested in guilt. Catholicism is an insidious religion because it constantly forces children to examine themselves. All of a sudden you're 14 and you think 'Heaven, I had a dirty thought.' This sort of guilt doesn't seem healthy to me ... Guilt, failure and unhappiness are terrified impetus to writing; I think almost as stimulating as anger and indignation. But I find them hard to sustain. When I start writing-I'm unhappy, angry or indignant. After a while I feel a kind of mad amusement and then I feel a genial compassion for the character I'm sending up. (The Age 12)

Thea Astley has been widely praised for the use of language, mostly her puns in different novels and short stories. Her language

reflects rich religious terminology and metaphor. *Girl with a Monkey* (1958) was her first novel and she admitted it to be autobiographical. The plot is structured around the farewell visit of Elsie to the friends she has made during her teaching career in Townsville. The novel received magnificent mention in the Sydney Morning Herald Contest. The story also highlights her relationship with the Catholic Church. She has questioned the Church's presentation of Christianity in Australia. The story establishes her dithering confidence in Christianity. Elaine Lindsay states:

Astley speaks of the unconditional love of God, the goodness of creation and the responsibility of people to care for one another. If Astley were to be refigured as prophet rather than satirist, she could well be seen to be part of that group of God-driven individuals called upon to re-examine church and society, urging them to goodness. She is preeminently a religious writer who has moved from accepting traditional Catholic beliefs about God and the Church to discarding those elements that do not bear up under the weight of personal experience or which are incompatible with her hope of a loving God.(Lindsay 7)

She started receiving outstanding acknowledgements for her works after the release of *The Slow Natives* (1965). She won her second Miles Franklin with *The Slow Natives* in 1965. Astel has used exclusive style in the novel by focusing on the fate of several characters and switching the attention from one to another. Clancy Laurie in *Thea Astley Biography* comments that, she moves "freely among a group, switching attention omnisciently from one to another. Almost all the characters suffer from some form of spiritual aridity; in Astley's vision, there often seems nothing between repression and empty or even corrupt sexuality". All the characters suffer from spiritual aridity. According to the Australian Book Review, "The Slow Natives is a remarkable book by an author with an unusual assortment of talents, enough to titillate any jaded appetite for novel-reading." The novel starts with the remark as below:

He'd first begun to steal when he was eleven.

No, they had both said, surprisingly in agreement, no, you may not have a six-stitcher.

He'd got a bit sick of arguing that October. The heat was terrible; The Terrace was a dried-up strip of sticky tar-paper. Okay, he had said. And he had gone into town and taken one from a city counter. It was so easy there wasn't even much fun in it. And of course he couldn't even use the ball but had to keep it hidden at the bottom of his play-box.

Fondling it in bed after his light was out, once he had dropped off to sleep with it against the pillow and when it had been discovered in the morning he became involved in a series of lies he was unable to sustain. They kept on hoping for a long time that he had borrowed it from a schoolmate as he had insisted, but each knew that glossy red globe was bright with its own guilt, and he became so tired of their upset and accusing eyes he had walked down to the park near the ferry one afternoon and chucked it straight back into the river where it went bobbing off down the tide. 'I gave it back', he announced at tea. 'Satisfied?' (The Slow Native 1)

Thea has closely observed adolescence in *The Slow Natives* and has presented significant modern suburban parents as well as their expectations from their children. According to J.K. Ewers in 'Creative Writing in Australia':

With a wider sphere of interest she (Thea Astley) could develop into one of the liveliest recorders of contemporary Australian life. Her sense of form, her sharp pen and her sense of detached cynicism, all elements perhaps may make her sound over brittle. (Ewers 150-55)

The Descent of Gossips (1960) by Astley is a story of two school teachers and a lonely young school girl. Three of them were exposed to various rumors in the society and malevolence against them which resulted into an eventual disaster. The story covers the sinister power of gossips in the society which can ruin the lives of the victims completely. It is based on a true story of a fat girl teased by her fellow students as pregnant and commits suicide. Astley was shocked by the story told to her by a school teacher and thought of writing a novel based on this incident.

She received a scholarship from Commonwealth Literary Fund in 1961. It was the time when she wrote the novel *The Well Dressed Explorer*. The novel is ridicule on the male dominating society by exposing the superficiality of the central character -George Brewster. He is a journalist who keeps moving to different cities with his patient wife. George is the 'Explorer' who loves to involve into different sexual relationship with women. The opening lines of the book are as mentioned below:

The weight of her on his shoulders was almost too much for him.

They circled the room, the boy on all fours, and he was on the point of collapsing to his elbows with the hiccupping laughter and the pain: the pain as she drove her heels in and

said 'Giddap, jumbo!' and the laughter as he turned his pale straining face to one side, to glimpse her leaning smile. 'Giddap, jumbo!' Abruptly the scream in his tendons dissolved in a supersonic agony and there he was, sprawling on his face while she lurched forward to topple over him onto the dusty playroom floor. A glimpse of navy knickers and plump thighs. Jumbo. Disentangled, they rolled on their backs, coughing and spluttering out the last of the tomfoolery and the images of their burlesque into the breathing-space of an armistice. (The Well Dressed Explorer 7)

Taylor, Cheryl and Perkins, Elizabeth (2007) in "Warm Words: North Queensland Writing" comments about *The Well Dressed Explorer* as: "The themes of this novel are common to Astley's novels, the hurts inflicted inadvertently and deliberately on others, the terrible shallowness underlying the inability to identify imaginatively with others, and the destruction of others and of the self by wrongly conceived actions." (Taylor and Perkin 246)

A Boatload of Home Folk (1968) was the fifth novel by Thea Astley. The story is about several tourists together on a tour. Astley has employed a unique literary device by introducing five of her characters in the novel from *The Slow Natives*. One of the tourists is a homosexual priest. Astley has drawn him as a sympathetic character, homosexually exploited at very young age during his stay at the boarding school by one of his seniors. He comes to New Hebrides to escape from his past he had at Condamine. Other 'Home Folks' shares their own sin and infidelity. The novel gradually progresses with a destructive cyclone.

The Acolyte (1972) won Thea Astley her third Miles Franklin Award. It appeared after a gap of four years. It has been marked as a witty book and one of Astley's favorites. 'The Acolyte' is Paul Vesper. The novel deals with the life and career of blind Jack Holberg, a fictional Australian musician and a composer. Jack receives popularity and international recognition after starving hard to establish his career as a musician in Grogbusters, a small town at Queensland where he uses to play a piano. Paul serves Jack by giving up his engineering career. He has describes Grogbusters as:

'a border town of rangy street sprawl in the southern part of the State with apple and grape farms plotting its granite ridges and sheep on random story-book squares'. (The Acolyte 3)

The novel carries human element of love, the frustration of Paul Vesper and his brutal reaction against the selfishness of Holberg. The Acolyte highlights the never ending personal, spiritual and artistic

desires of human beings. Astley claimed that *The Acolyte* is her favorite work, "I don't even remember the pain of writing it. I wrote it fairly quickly in less than a year and, when I came to retype it, I hardly made any alterations." According to Jennifer Ellison, "The sophisticated narrative, its fragmented treatment of the relations of people in Holmberg's house, and the density of its style notwithstanding, the novel succeeds in probing the mysterious psyche of the blind musician genius and the effect he has on others." (Jennifer Ellison 4)

On the other hand, *A Kindness Cup* by Astley centers on the post-colonial race with all its brutality and violence. It is established by the oppression of Aboriginal people and women in the late 19th century Australian society. A former teacher Dorahy, unable to forget the treachery and the violence against the aboriginals accused of making depredations in the local farms. She witnessed this event before twenty five years. The novel focuses on the dominating ideologies and cultural beliefs of the white colonizers. It highlights the injustice experienced by the marginalized group. Thea Astley with a post colonial perspective, attempts to give a voice to the dominated group and to reconstruct the idea of normality. In the novel, the society is divided into two parts: people who supported the dominant ideologies and those who rejected it. Astley has used a different narrative technique by shifting continuously from present to past and back to present. *A Kindness Cup* was the Australian Book of the Year for 1974.

An Item in the Late News (1982), deals with evils prevailing in the society and a search for peace. Elaine Lindsay mentions about the novel that:

In societies that lack religious understanding, people don't see the choice they have between self-interested behavior and the emulation of Divine love. It is these books where God is absent that most show the need for God. In other words, to emulate the goodness of God is an alternative that doesn't exist for those ignorant of Him. If this alternative is ignored through ignorance or malice, dire consequences are to be expected... for Astley, God is made present only by the selfless behavior of people open to God. (Lindsay 21)

Another work which left a long lasting impression for Thea Astley was *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*. (1996) It is a novel which underlines the most violent incident at Palm Island in the year 1930. It recalls the fire set by the white government superintendent in a building, killing his own children and finally shot dead by one of the aboriginal. He was replaced by another official who was equally inhuman to understand the pathetic state of the aboriginals on an island.

Drylands by Astley was written in 1999 and was her last novel. It deals with variety of themes like Culture, Power, Politics, small-town life and society and about the superficial law and justice. It is a story of a dying land. Joss, one of the characters in Drylands utters:

I do wish the sporting blah blah would stop stop stop...this country is round the bend over jumping and kicking and running all in the name of winning. It isn't about sport any more. It's about power. And money. And politics. And it's boring. My God, it's boring.' (Drylands 249)

According to Kerryn Goldsworthy in an article on 'Undimmed Outrage':

I love Thea Astley's writing and always have. I love its densely woven grammar, its ingrained humour, its uncompromising politics, its demented metaphors, and its undimmed outrage at human folly, stupidity and greed. I love the way that even at its most savage and despairing, it has always had a suggestion of redemptive energy working away somewhere in the plot, no matter how subterranean, outmaneuvered or comprehensively beaten down.... Her new book has all these qualities except, alas, the last. Drylands is Astley's Waste Land, with a cast of exhausted and alienated characters wandering through it in the death-grip of entropy, pursued by fin de siècle furies and other personifications of failure and defeat. In the small town of Drylands there are no fragments shored against anybody's ruin (well, there are, but even the fragments get vandalized and tossed), and there is certainly none of the peace that passeth understanding. (Goldsworthy 294)

Thea Astley's Fictional Worlds, edited by Susan Sheridan and Paul Genoni (2007) acknowledges Astley's appeal to a national audience and also predicts growing interest in her work on the grounds that:

In a globalised world, where the post-colonial condition is widely experienced, her sharp analysis of power will continue to find new and appreciative readers: and her insight into psychological and physical violence involved in the relations between races, sexes and generations will remain universally relevant. Matters of character, community, obligation, fidelity and good faith are raised time and again in her fiction; and they transcend geographic boundaries as effortlessly as they transcend time. (Sheridan and Genoni xvii)

Astley has emerged as a role model for all the Australian women. She has always displayed bravery to question and criticize Christianity and the role of Church. She has captured the changing role of religion

and spirituality in Australia. She was well aware of the fact that she will be severely criticized by being a satirist and a woman. She has confessed in "Writing in North Queensland" that:

Perhaps it is because I am a woman-and no reviewer, especially a male one, can believe for one split infinitive of a second... that irony or a sense of comedy, or a grotesque in a woman is activated by anything but the nutrients derived from "backyard Malice". Assuming these particular qualities -sense for irony, eye for the comic or the grotesque- are an indication of intelligence and believing a priori that no woman is intelligent, critics assign the evidence of humour, irony or comedy to darker forces at work; the Salem judgment comes into play and the lady writer most certainly is for burning. (Astley 4)

Thea Astley has never compromised on the themes of her books. She has handled controversial topics with extraordinary use of commanding words, complex structures and sharp observations. Thea Astley was also accused for being a feminist. She has explained in an interview with Robert Drewe of 'The Age' that:

Perhaps I am a bit of feminist. I remember walking down the George Street the other day and seeing all the slick PR types with their smart three buttoned suits, all looking at me if I was a very second class citizen. They casually surveyed me with their virile, superior species faces and then discarded me because I'm not a glamorous doll... I don't think women really are men's equal, but I would like to be regarded as a member of the same species. I wish to God men thought women have minds. I just want them to regard us as human beings and not as objects d'art. But no, I'm not a feminist really. (The Age 12)

Her novels make reader to think over trivial issues prevailing in the society. She does it by introducing humour, wit, satire and sharp imagination. Writing is a medium which helped her to liberate her thoughts on Australian society, culture, rationalism, religion and violence. She has explained the process of writing for her as:

Throughout all my writing years I have been aware of one intention only, I suppose, and that is to try to recapture for myself certain moments, incidents, events that have at the time acted as some kind of emotional impetus. Writing about them seemed to give permanence. Others might read what I had seen or felt and be affected too. This is what I hoped. But primarily writing is a form of self-indulgence. I admit readily that as I wrote, the shape or outline of the captive

moment changed.... I have always been interested in the misfit, the outsider, and the less than successful. That is why several of my novels or stories deal with blacks or half castes, with adolescents or 'failures' in the world's sense of the term. (Astley 1)

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