

Critical analysis of Dennis Haskell poems: A leading Voice in Australian poetry

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Abstract

Australian poetry is the result of various stages that came in actual form from colonial period first by convict settlers and later by local colonial poets. Poetry emerged in Australian literature before the expansion of colonial empire but initially it was in oral forms and was not considered accountable by the modern critics. But in the 19th century various local as well as national poets emerged who produced miscellaneous collections of the poems. The modern Australian poetry saw the unprecedented change in Australian literature with the works of Judith Wright, A.D. Hope, Kenneth Slessor, Gwen Harwood, Kath Walker and others. Likewise prose writing, poetry was also composed on diverse subjects and the recurrent subjects in Australian poetry were cultural heritage, aborigines, modernity, technological advancement, emergence of urbanity as well as war, elegy, and others. The contemporary period in Australian literary also saw the emergence of many remarkable poets such as Gwen Harwood, John Forbes, Bruce Bennett, and John Tranter whose poetry writings proved significant source for the next generation. Dennis Haskell is one of the leading voice in Australian poetry whose writings are marked for new techniques, images and Australian identity as well as for multicultural aspects. Haskell is not bound himself in country subjects but also produces poetry on overseas culture heritage. In the first paper I will discuss the Dennis Haskell and his writings in the context of modern Australian poetry and will also focus on different subjects and themes in his poetry.

Keywords- Poetry, Australian poetry, Dennis Haskell, human relationship, death, multicultural and other themes.

The poetry genre in Australian literature was not the result of a strong beginning or like English poetry of Chaucer and Milton but shaped gradually in different phases. It is opined that Australian poetry in early span was neither in good form nor recounts later significant contribution. Earlier it was produced but in oral form with anonymous identity that didn't show any accountability. Though there are some instances of poems by some of the early poets but they didn't show much strong individuality and profound ability so that they can categorize in actual poetry basket. Further after becoming colonial region there were some writers, mostly English by birth, that tries hand in this form and produces poetry on local and ordinary subjects. It is believed that the real beginning of poetry in Australian literature begins with the colonial poets such as Charles Harper, Henry Lawson, Banjo Patterson and others in 19th century. In so far they could be categorized as the real beginners of poetry in Australian literature. Their writings gave a new direction to the Australian poetry and paved the ways for the next generation. In their poetry the recurrent and important subjects were nationalism, bushrangers, horse riders, underdog and harsh beauties of the land and others. In brief their poetry was Australian in subjects, language and in form. Modern Australian poetry saw the collection of legendary international recognized figure Judith Wright, A.D. Hope, and Kath Walker, Jack Davies and Kenneth Slessor. Their poetry give a remarkable position to the Australian poetry at national as well as in abroad literature. In today scenario it can be suggest though there are various remarkable poets who have contributed poetry collections in a large scale but the condition of poetry is not significant as it is believed in literary world. In today literary world Poetry has no strong readership nor receives much attention now by the people. The English literature has largely covered today with fiction and prose literature and it has strong audience and readership in the literary world rather than poetry. Poetry doesn't get the strong position due to lack of readership and somehow because of negligence by the critics and writers. Poetry genre has long history of dominance in literary world and played a significant role to bring change in literary era in different phases such in 18th century the poetry of Pope, Dryden, and Swift, Matthew Arnold, Edgar Poe, W.H. Auden, Philip Larkin, Thomas Hardy and others. In Australian poetry there are also miscellaneous prominent poets like Kenneth Slessor, Judith Wright, A.D. Hope, Bruce Dawe, Fay Zwicky and many poetry movements like Jindyworobak played key role to enhance the position of poetry genre in Australian literature.

Dennis Haskell is a leading poet in Australian poetry. He was born in Sydney, grew up there and later moved to Perth, Australia. He has composed more than six poetry collections and various critical works on different writers and worked as editor in Westerly. Currently he is an emeritus professor in the University of Western Australian and has also worked as chairman of the Australia Council's Literature Board in 2011. His Poetry was shortlisted many times for man literary award and in 2006 his poetry volume *All the Time in the World* got Western Australian Premier's Book Awards. Dennis poetry covers multiple subjects and culture that makes him a most promising poet in Australian poetry today. Earlier Haskell worked as a critic academic and also produces some prose works but later he changes his test and moves himself towards poetry. He shares his views on the journey to become a poet:

The first things I wrote were short stories - they were terrible, but I did get a lot of encouragement for them. I did an adult education course in play writing. I wrote some bits of plays which weren't too bad - probably. Poetry was the third thing I came to writing, but once I got there I was hooked."(Interview 1997)

The recurrent subjects in his works are love, death, relationship between human beings covered or presented in local colorful environment. In his poetry it seems that he always kept attached himself with country culture, people and places. Furthermore he wrote on the other different country culture, traditions, style, art and heritage which are remarkable characteristics of his poetry. Here I picked some of striking lyrical pieces which shows his peculiarity and profound dexterity and artistic skills. *Visiting friends at Henley* is one of Haskell poem that speaks about the poet's deep observation of the things and the connections between

human beings and importance of life for others. It might be referred as a personal poem because it was inspired by the poet's visit with her wife to her friend house in New South Wales, Sydney. The main elements and themes revolve in the poem are love, death, human relationship, optimism and landscapes, rural elements and cultural representation of many countries. Haskell doesn't show much orientation towards landscape subject in his poetry like many other Australian poets of his age and in earlier period but the some of his poems gives the description of the flowers, landscapes and trees. Here the opening lines give the description of landscape surroundings of the place which seems exotic and beautiful:

We cross the street, and along the path

to a house leaning on the river,

A garden tangled with sticks and unopened jasmine.

Haskell is noted for his observation of the things very minutely that creates strong qualities in his writings and suggests that he loves to describe what he feels and sees. In this poem he depicted the things that he observes inside the house such as the elegant paintings over the wall of the house which painted by expensive prints: "*Venice in sunlight, and old fruit bowl, The Tailor...*" The references of *the tailor* print inside the house suggest the painting of The Tailor, one of the world known portraits designed by the Italian painter Giovanni Battista in 1570. Despite these poet describes the situation of the house which he found unusually cultured and the books in each corner veiled with dust, "*Books, almost all now unread, around each corner of the room, lit with dust.*" In second section of the poem, we find the poet's shifting his mood from the various counted things to another side which gives a sign of someone who is no more in this world and only his memories haunting the place now. The reference of demise of a person is the result of poet actual visit to a house where an old aged man is passed away some years ago. The center part of the poem is based on the death of the old man and his family. Poet describes the things with the fusion of gloomy and light ambience. The different changes of the mood from calm to sad and later the reflection of the optimism makes the poem noteworthy. He speaks on mortality by making reference of old man demise and by hearing conversation in which he learned: "*Conversation goes on slowly; Death matters and we can't help it.*" Further the poet gives his views on mortality that death is mortal but the deeds a person does in his life are eternal and he says, if we do something major and goods for others we always kept remain in the memories of ours loved ones. The description of the three women and their optimistic thinking of someone returning back signify the importance of life:

Three women around a cedar table: two old, one young,

Waiting with irrational patience,

Quietly, believing, and needing to believe

That at any moment

Something might knock, come

To refill their lives

With his invisible and eternal happiness.

Haskell's poetry vividly captures his travel experiences that labeled as travel poems. There are many poems which describes his journey experience in the crafted forms. *Night Flight* is just about the experience of flying which has always seemed to the poet a bit of surreal. It recounts the travel of Haskell from Perth to another place and the thing float in his mind. Haskell poetry is also noted for his deep insight and closely observation of the things. Here in a poem section he describes the dark night experiences during the journey:

Then the dark, we presume, sweep beneath us.

A light twitching at the end of the wing,

Like an eyelid, belies our speed.

Underneath now is all the dark assurance

Of absence- absence of shapes, of space,

Absence of relationship, absence of light:

To take off is to forfeit your perspectives.

In *Abacadabra* the poem from the similar title collection also recounts his experiences of travelling from Perth to Sydney. The opening passage he relates the plane take off to the life unpredictable moment. He asserts that take off the plane makes him feel that it's like that your life is over before you come to realize its importance: "*Taking off is like life itself/ over before you know it.*" Another poem in the form of sonnet *The Mitchell Freeway* is about driving fast on a freeway in Perth.

Straight and smooth and stretched

Over sand, scrub, hidden water,

Flashing on, and on, the air never stilled

Above the swift, purring laughter

Of the tyres, mile after fierce mile.....

Haskell poetry is largely designed for the common readers which he usually mentions in his interviews. He says:

I try to write poetry that remains accessible to people, to anyone.I try to write poetry of lived experience, and the reader goes through the experience in reading it. Poetry can do that well than any other form of language. I think poetry has reached its diamond element and won't get chipped away any more. (Interview1997)

Another subject that remain constant in his poetry was the abundantly description of his family i.e. father, son and of wife. One of his recent poetry volumes *Ahead of us* wholly speaks about his wife and the cancer that becomes the cause of his wife death. It portrayed poet's love for his wife and their relationship and somehow the poems in the volume represent the cancer patient of across the world and their anguish, suffering, endurance and others. Besides there are many poems which appeared in many collections and that speaks poet's relationship with his wife and their constant love. 'No one ever found you' is a beautiful love poem which portrayed a strong love relationship of poet and his wife. The following line reflects poet's unbound love for his wife and their growing relationship with different phases:

We have shifted cities, our shift

Into each other's lives so complete

..... And how much our lives have passed

Our days will be filled with green

And we grow together like grass.

In *Denials of choices* which also speaks about poet's love to his partner. Here Haskell employed natural imagery to describe the love elements which makes poem more popular and noteworthy. The poem might be refer erotic because there are various passage which significantly shows physical imagery under the shadow natural images and somehow shows poet's confessional attitudes:

I see its surveying hand fly just above

The earth-warming landscape of your thighs

And land gently on the stubbly crop

Of hair above your cunt.

The word "cunt" refers to the strong sensual part of the female body which suggests the poet's idea of showing his loving nature towards his wife. It is used earlier by Eric Roll in his prose work for his wife. Haskell' poetry is also characterized by the representation of the different culture. As an academic, he visited many countries for lectures and for many academic programs and other activity and despite he portrayed the different cultural and tradition and values in his writings. The Poem *In New Bangkok* he vividly describes the multifarious and colorful pictures of Thailand city both in night and day and the streets, monks, Lord Buddha and Novices or beginners who became the monk later and etc. In the following lines he brings the night description of the Patpong Street:

Only at night Paptong street

...trinkets, and earrings, t-shirts and toys

Gold model Buddha's and specials

On cocks and cunts... (27)

The rural Australia could be seen in *Near Gwabegar*, a poem appear in the collection *Abracadabra 1993*, which gives presents the remoteness and rural surroundings:

Men going slowly to the wall

Moan about it like cattle

In the unending sunshine;

Windmills idle, while the cattle

Thin out, slink onto their knees,

Beneath wiry gums..

In brief here poet captures the picture of drought affected rural area which occurs intermittently in Australia and it is believed to be the strong part of country nature. *For Thomas Hardy* is one of his poems which examine poet's aesthetic ideas and also presents poet's views on religion and spirituality which, the poet believed, can't be experienced or feel by getting engaged into worldly life but it can be received in ordinary and natural things. According to the poet only in common things around us and in mediocre lives one can get the true meaning of life:

Grass, the earth, the roots of grass

Perhaps meaning is found,

Only in the minute perception

Of old and familiar objects.

.....If you wish to discover

The Gods you must look

To things, not into your own mind.

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