

# The manifestation of multiculturalism in Dennis Haskell Poetry

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## Abstract:

It is stated that Australian poetry in the 19th century was largely dominant with the local subjects that includes bush, underdog, rural Australia and landscapes. In modern period Australian poetry saw the emergence of poetry on aboriginals, historical and ancestral cultural values, rituals, and other subjects. Besides, there are many movements that endorse indigenous culture and speak for the aboriginal rights. The satirical and elegiac poetry and the influences of the world war remain the significant part of the modern poetry. In contemporary period the manifestation of American culture and literature in Australian poetry remain prominent. Many poets like Bruce Dawe and others produced poetry on Vietnam War that is considered remarkable and claimed to be the homage to the Australian soldiers who have lost their lives in war. Moreover, today in Australian poetry there are many poets who contributed miscellaneous collection that concerned with multicultural themes, national rural aspects and human relationship and traditional values, aboriginals, bush subjects. Dennis Haskell is one of the leading poets whose poetry comprises different subjects and his poetry marked for simplicity and directness. Generally, his poetry deals with the subjects of love, death, relationship and suffering, landscapes, rural Australia, familiar experiences and reflects Australianess, an identity that classified him a national poet. On the other side his travel poems which bring the multicultural subjects that are the result of his experiences of the overseas journey. Besides him, there are other key poets in Australian poetry who also wrote on their experiences of abroad subjects and country heritage and its people, places and culture. It is opined that the Asian specific region remain a significant source for Australian poet's. Here this paper will discuss the multiculturalism aspects under the umbrella of Haskell's poems on Singapore, America and Shanghai cultural, people and places and historical aspects.

Keywords: Australian poetry, Dennis Haskell, multicultural, cultural interaction, travel poetry, themes, love, death, relationship.

Australia is a nation which is mainly known for its different ethnic and cultural society. In the present age, the Australian poet also produced poetry on national as well as abroad that shows the multicultural spirit in their writings. The contemporary poet of 60s generation in Australia largely influenced from the American pop and rock culture. It was the age of the Bob Dylan, Beatles music in America which influenced the literature of Australian 60s generation. It is noted in Australian poetry that the presence of Asian specific country culture and literature remain strong and much of the Australian writings in different forms reflects this in a meticulous way. There are many poets whose poetry subjects comprises different culture, people and description of the places such as John Tranter and Dennis Haskell, Caroline Caddy, John Kinsella and others. However Australian Poetry is largely dominant with country landscapes, bushrangers, indigenous and natural geography and national history subjects which reflect national identity and ethnicity in their works. Dennis Haskell is a poet, academic and critic. He is acclaimed among his group the most promising poet of Australia. He wrote eight poetry volumes which deal with the different subjects and themes and also awarded many literary awards for his remarkable lyrics. His poetry is noted for directness and simplicity and assessed the poetry of every common being. He didn't endorse the specification of the poetry into the universities and academic institution but always appeal to reach common reader through his writings: "I detest academic poetry and seek a poetry that uses language as fully as possible yet speaks to that elusive creature, the common reader."(Qt. Geoff page).

In Haskell poetry one can easily identify the traditional subjects and themes that associate him with other Australian poets. Haskell profound interest in South Asian Literature and culture which is a distinctive and the poetry of him on the different country and its culture, people positioned him among the distinguished poets of the Australia. Among his poems that shows Australianess concerned with the subjects of bush, landscapes, rural areas and present description of the different places such as Perth, Sydney, New South Wales towns and remote country areas. But Here I particularly focused on the writings that mainly

concerned with the multicultural subjects and poetry on Singapore, America and Shanghai and others. Many of his poetry on diverse abroad cultures and other aspects is the result of his travelling experiences to the many places: "It enabled my wife and me to enjoy many places, people and cultures. I found these new experiences inspiring. In a new place, normally mundane activities can become interesting."(Interview, 2016)

The travel poems of Haskell appear in different anthologies and poetry volumes. These poems present his observation over the things that he experienced in his visit of various parts of the world. Despite verse collection Haskell wrote many prose writings such articles, reviews and critical studies about the Asian writings and about the different cultural identity. Among the countries that remain prominent subject material for his works are India, Singapore, Malaysia, China, Thailand, England, America and also Middle East:

Some of the Asian books are my favorites. I've done a lot of work on Australian-Asian links and on Southeast Asian literature in English. Some of it's quite hard to get a hold of. Its stuff I've picked up when I had been in Asia. I went up to teach at the National University of Singapore in late 1987, so '87 into '88 for a semester, and that alerted me to a lot of writing, especially Singaporean, but also Singapore-Malaysian writing. (Interview, 2018)

I discussed some of his poems that mainly speak about the poets travel experiences of different countries and his painstaking observation of the different cities and places, traditional values, historical elements and also discuss the poems which explicitly show the influence of American music culture and literature. The Poem titled *152: Shanghai Beijing* examine the poets experience to the visit of Shanghai the most populous city of the China. Here poet describes the city description and the ongoing activities which he observed there. Here Haskell presents what he experienced in a very direct and somber language. The language of the poem is very smooth and easy to catch the moments that has been discussed here. The poem initiate with the poets nostalgic mood in which he recalls the old city of Shanghai which is different today and changed completely. Meanwhile the poet presents the picture of the city and the things that he encounter during his visit to the place:

I thought naturally, as we've been taught to,  
Of past-glorious shanghai, it's now people-sardined streets  
Fenced by green sandshoe soldiers, expressionless, National day,  
Tiananmen, years and years of political repression, of bureaucracy  
So intense it almost seems exotic, and this landscape  
We rattled through so fast  
While drawn-out, high-pitched voices  
Slid from state-controlled speakers.

The reference of soldiers, Tiananmen place and repressive status in above passage suggest the idea poet's recalling the earlier incident that occurred here and which led to the death of many protesters in 1989. Meanwhile the description of such things signifies that poet's idea of the current political situation in the country. The following passage covered poet's observation that result out in his mind after his deep inspection of the buildings, towns and other things. The old structure buildings and other things brings in poet mind the earlier pictures of the place and he feels that these places signify the five thousand old histories of the country.

Even no-language – I knew the people aboard

Were being careful about what they said

.....with long-sticked buckets, implements reminiscent of shadufs,

Scatterings of trees across the long flat fields,

Crisscrossing of gleaming wires

Upon their giant stilts,

Frequent bamboo-scaffolded and broken-tiled towns,

Tall grey walls, gantries and piles cement

Or dust, unaccountable towers, and sifting of smoke

At the ends of dirt streets,

The arching of industry and high box flats.

Five thousand years of history, and some buildings

Look like they have witnessed every incident.

The poem gives us the beautiful portraiture of the Shanghai city and the reference of the various things such as Pagoda roof that is prominent part of Chinese architecture and which represent the country identity in many ways. Here Poet looks like in anger when he asserts that as western country destroys their culture and traditional values after the industrial revolution, similarly China also lost its cultural heritage and traditional values after the China revolution 1946 in the country.

This was eastern China- flat and

Suddenly soaring into mountains,

Why very occasionally a distinctively

Curved, upwards-lipped pagoda-like roof;

The revolution has replaced all that

On once collectivized farms

With factories, as dirty as west.

The last section of the poem presents the observation of the things that poet perceived inside the train. The depiction of rounded bridges, small canals, coal areas, railway yards and others reminds poet past pictures of the Shanghai city. However, the poem ends with the description of the beautiful activities of the nature and the reference of the small houses where poet heard many voices which make him relaxed and delighted.

From the train, skipping over small canals

Only small arched bridges

Reminisce about the past.

Piles of coal beside the tracks

And railway yards with contemporary equipment

From another age, boats and buildings leeches of the hour.

Nearby, sunflowers stand and bend their obedient heads.

Then, before the last of the landscape

Disappeared into dusk

I could see tongues of light begin to speak

In the small, stone peasant houses.

The Poem *The Livin' is easy* appeared in the volume *Abracadabra* 1993. Here poem speaks about the idea of pop and rock music culture in America. The poem describes the American period of Bob Dylan, Beatles music and others rock stars and their influence over the generation and the literary world. It is believed that the 1960s of Australia were much influenced by the American culture and the literature. Here Haskell speaks the impacts of the two major figures of the music world Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin who were very popular for their songs, styles and drugs habit that mainly influenced the young generation in America as well as in Australia. Meanwhile Haskell also speaks about his interest of music and references of the singer whom he liked but such music is eclipsed and no more found in today period according to the poet. In some ways this poem suggest the prevailing American culture and about the society. The poem ends with the line from the song of George Gershwin, an American singer and pianist. The Poem concerned the poet imaginative observation over the things after the death of the Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin.

When Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin died

The pop music ended, at least for me,

The microphones stopped waving,

The speakers sat silenced.

Full fathom five their fame would lie;

All those wonderful easy ideas

Suddenly meant yesterday.

.....Those voodoo child, spoilt child

Fertility figures could gloat

Over every amplified movement. When youth

Was undeniable, too strong for compromise,

They sized up an easy joke,

Thumped out a flying, perilous grief.

Now try them under electric needles:

Do fish start jumpin? Does the cotton grow high?

Another poem that I find interesting is *Thaipusam*. It is mainly based on poet's experience of Singapore visit and concerned with the multiculturalism, a strong part of Singapore. Singapore is largely dominated by the Buddhism but there are also various communities who shared different culture, traditions and adherence of different religion. The country is the part of South East Asia. Among the prominent ethnic communities in Singapore, the prominent are Chinese, Malay and Tamil an ethnic community in India and Muslim who largely came from Malaysian region after the independence of Singapore in 1963 from the United Kingdom. Here Poet describes a religious festival that associated with Tamil community in Singapore. This festival is believed to be the most sacred occasion in the Tamils and also considered one of the significant parts of the vibrant mix culture of Singapore. However, this festival could be seen in others parts of Asian countries where this community has the strong presence such as India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Mauritius. Nevertheless, this poem speaks about the festivals and the things that Haskell experienced during the procession of this occasion on the streets of Singapore. It also speaks about the poet attitudes towards the rituals that result out after seeing the multiple things that he finds new and strange. The last line of the poem shows the poet's westerner attitudes towards the eastern culture that he finds uneasy and difficult to digest. Here the poet presents the different attitudes about different culture over the things. He refers to the Anne Brewster who is also the observer of the occasion with poet and he claimed to be poet's colleague and friends from Australia. The following lines present the specific description of the activities that seem to be the art of the festival.

And through it all penitents of Thaipusam  
Mince oblivious, March and dance, lean into the trance.  
With golden skewers through tongue or cheek  
They cannot speak. But ought not if they could.  
What could be spoken from that other state  
Of mind which proves the flesh is nought?  
One set of Indian eyes lolls as if in pain; he staggers  
Then stand erect: mind triumphs over the body again.  
And looking, through western eyes, at men with hooks  
Stuck into flesh, their chest and backs

Wishing the weight of limes, or arcs of steel  
With arrow showers sent in perpetual fire  
At the penitent flesh, below peacock displays,

The poem is the prime instance to know the Thaipusam, a strong part of Tamil's culture. The description of the different religious practices and rituals conducted by the Tamil People make the poet's friend sad and frightened and somehow he feels stagger in his whole body. Poet also experienced similar feelings and his body also feels shrinking movement out of pain that causes by the sacred dance and practices which causes the unpleasant pain and grief in poet and lastly he find himself incapable to see the things and moved away his eyes from the scenes:

My stomach knots and I wince as they dance and chant  
their three kilometer trip into cleansing forgiveness.

Some walk on nails, some with lashing whips mesh,

and dripping milk. In the newly brooding heat

I can say nothing; my nerves take my eyes away,

The western mind asway at the mercy of the flesh.

However the poem is a significant example of the different cultural society in Singapore and shows poets deep insight over the things and focused on the poet's unusual attitudes towards the eastern rituals and practices that he perceives in the festival. Besides this all three poems are the results of poet's travel experience and signify Haskell well understanding over the overseas subjects and his steadfast interest in different culture, places and people and national heritage.

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