

Australian literary representation and the construction of home

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Abstract: Literary representation has been one of the significant pathways for Australians to seek national identity and build a sense of home. From the arrival of white settlers in Australia to the end of the 20th century, the literary representation of this land by Australian writers has undergone a transformation from rural to urban areas and from a singular to a pluralistic approach. During the colonial period, Australian literary representation was primarily focused on the unique natural environment of Australia, yet it was regarded as an "other" on the periphery. In the period of nationalism, the representation was of the bush, which had distinct Australian characteristics. After World War II, the focus of representing Australia began to shift towards the cities, ultimately leading to a successful portrayal of Australia. The evolution of the main subjects of Australian literary representation mirrors the cultural development of Australians from being subordinate to Britain and experiencing confusion and inferiority, to becoming independent and confident in representing Australia and constructing their spiritual home.

Keywords: Australian Literature, Literary Representation, Home Construction

1. Introduction

What is "representation"? Its English expression is 'representation,' which corresponds to 'representation' in French and 'Darstellung' in German, all derived from the Latin 'repraesentare,' with 're-presenting' being its most common meaning. The British scholar Stuart Hall cited the "Concise Oxford English Dictionary" to provide two related meanings of this term: "1. To represent something is to depict or describe it, to bring it to mind by drawing a picture or imagining it; to place a likeness of it before our minds and senses; 2. Representation also means to symbolize, to stand for, to serve as a specimen of (something), or to substitute." Hall explained, "Representation links meaning and language with culture," which means "to say something meaningful to others about the world in language, or to articulate the world meaningfully," "it is a necessary part of the process of meaning production and exchange among the members of a culture." In short, "representation is the production of meaning through language" [1].

Literary representation is one of the important ways for Australians to build a sense of home. As early as September 25, 1929, in a column article of the *Illustrated Tasmanian Mail*, literary critic Nettie Palmer cited the viewpoint from the lecture titled "The Arts in Australia" by illustrator Will Dyson, stating: "In the creed that every artist follows, there is such a belief—that without the depiction by words or brush, nothing exists." Nettie Palmer then declared that, in this sense, with the development of Australian literature, this kind of "depiction" of Australia is increasing, and "the sense of presence that Australia brings to people is growing day by day" [2]. We can understand this as follows: As a cultural concept, to a large extent, Australia is constructed by people through the use of "language" as a tool of signification, endowing it with meaning. This meaning is shared by Australians and is seen as their cultural belonging. As Hall's example illustrates: It is our use of a pile of bricks and mortar that makes it a "house"; it is our feelings, thoughts, and discussions about it that turn the "house" into a "home" [2]. Similarly, it is the representation of Australia by Australians, that is, their description, discussion, and contemplation of it, that makes Australia a home in the cultural sense. Therefore, representation is an important means of building a home in the cultural sense. Historian David Day also pointed out in his writings: For colonizers to truly possess a newly opened colony, they need to go through three different steps, among which the third step is to "use art, literature, newspapers,

history, etc., to represent this new land as the 'home' of the colonizers, thereby achieving cultural or symbolic possession" [3]. In essence, it is to build a home through cultural representation.

In addition, as a post-colonial nation, Australians have suffered greatly from "displacement," a term often used to describe the inconsistency between the colony and the imperial discourse that represents it. This "displacement" has caused significant distress in the cultural construction of home for Australians. The great writer Henry Lawson once described his experience of "displacement" with an anecdote from his childhood geography class: in an Australian primary school classroom, students were using textbooks written by the British Education Committee for Irish students, and everything depicted in the books was so unfamiliar to Australian students. The teacher could only explain the content of the book to the students in words, but standing on the school playground, young Lawson did not feel that the textbook was wrong. On the contrary, he thought that "it was the place where he was that was wrong" [4]. Bill Ashcroft believes that this phenomenon, mainly caused by the "displacement" of the colonial education system and the cultural hegemony of the colonizers, leads people to have the illusion that "real life happens elsewhere" [5]. In this way, "displacement" has caused a sense of alienation between the people of post-colonial countries and the land they live on, and an identity crisis has arisen as a result. To change this situation of "displacement" and eliminate the estrangement between people and the land, people must learn to represent themselves, to represent the land they live on from their own perspective, not that of the colonizers. Because of this, representation has become an indispensable step in the process of home construction for Australians. Studying this representation from a literary perspective not only helps us understand how Australian literature has gradually moved from being dependent on Britain and accustomed to "being represented" to "self-representation," but also helps us understand how Australians have built a home and turned this originally unfamiliar land into a place for their own existence and livelihood.

2. Colonial Period: marginal representation

In fact, even before the immigration to the Australian continent, Europeans had already begun to represent this land, calling it the "Southern Continent" ("Terra Australis"). Because they knew very little about this land, their representation was full of imagination. Due to the differences in the purposes of representation, the "Southern Continent" presented different appearances in the writings of different representers, rich and colorful. Some depicted this continent as a place where mysterious creatures such as monsters and giant birds lurk; others used this land as a metaphorical object to preach to the world on various levels or to criticize the social ills of Europe. The most famous of these is Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels." Some studies have pointed out that the geographical locations of Lilliput and the Houyhnhnms described in "Gulliver's Travels" are very close to Australia. [6]

In 1788, Captain Arthur Phillip led the establishment of the first Australian colony in New South Wales, marking the beginning of the Australians' self-representation of this land. Australian literature can be divided into two main categories regarding the representation of Australia: the representation of Australia's natural environment and the representation of cities. The renowned critic Graeme Turner has noted that in the representation of Australia, there are two opposing tendencies in terms of content, with writers and artists wavering between choosing the countryside or the city, nature or society as the object of representation. [7] Throughout the history of Australian literature, regardless of the period, nature or society, the countryside or the city have always been the inevitable choices for Australian representers. The specific cultural images resulting from these representations vary according to the different periods and positions of the writers.

During the colonial period, Australian literary representation primarily focused on the unique natural environment of Australia, with cities almost absent in the literary works of that time. This was closely related to the country's special historical background. Before 1840, there were no "cities" in Australia; even the metropolises of today like Sydney and Melbourne were merely "towns" at that time. Thus, it is understandable that descriptions of "cities" were hard to find in Australian literature before the mid-19th century.

Due to the difference in geographical location, Australia's natural environment is starkly different from that of Europe. On this land, "swans are black instead of white; eucalyptus trees shed their bark instead of leaves in the opposite season to Europe; the birds here seem not to sing, and even the flowers do not emit

fragrance" [8]. For a long time, Australians, especially the white settlers in the mainstream society, have been wavering between love and hate towards such a natural environment that is so different from England. This tendency is particularly evident in the literary works of the colonial period in Australia. On the one hand, readers see a land closely associated with death, exile, and hardship, just like "hell". The famous novelist Markus Clark believed that this place is very easy to make people melancholic and depressed. He once lamented: "What is the main tone of the Australian landscape? That is the main melody in the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe - strange and gloomy. ... The mountains, rivers, plants, and trees of Australia are as mysterious and solemn as a funeral, lonely and desolate." [8] In the words of the explorer Ernest Giles, the endless wilderness of Australia is vast and desolate, giving people a strong sense of oppression: "Thought is forced to focus on itself, all kinds of thoughts are intertwined in the mind, endless, wandering in this huge space dotted with stars; here, (you) can only see, love, and gaze at the blue sky above your head and the stars twinkling in it at night. This is the only thing that can bring a little peace to your soul." [8]

On the other hand, there is no lack of positive representation of this land in the Australian literature of this period. Watkins Trench, a naval officer who came to Australia with the First Fleet, is one of the important literary works of the Australian colonial period in his "Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay." He described his first impression of this country: "Overall, the country is pleasing, with a rich terrain, where the mountains are not steep and the canyons are not winding. ... Novel shrubs can be seen everywhere, full of flowers, and these flowers are unparalleled in appearance, fragrance, and quantity..." [8] In addition, Michael Massey Robinson, known as the first Australian poet laureate, published a series of poems celebrating the birthday of the British king in the "Sydney Gazette" from 1810 to 1820 (such as "Ode on His Majesty's Birthday," 1810), a total of 21, which praised the natural scenery of Australia with enthusiasm and depicted Australia as a beautiful and peaceful paradise. Similarly, Henry Kingsley and other legendary novelists also affirmed the representation of Australia. In Henry Kingsley's long novel "The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn" (1859), the protagonists are all gentlemen and ladies from the UK who ride and hunt, talk about love, and live a comfortable pastoral life on the beautiful Australian ranch. This land is described as "A brand new place, A brand new heaven" [8]. In Charles Rowcroft's representative work "Tales of Colonies" (1843), Australia is a tempting land full of opportunities everywhere, a good place to get rich, and only waiting for young people with aspirations to come here to show their talents: here, crops grow well without fertilization and cultivation; flocks reproduce quickly without care and management... [9]

The two seemingly opposing attitudes towards the representation of Australia are, in fact, converging, as the representers view this land through "British" rather than "Australian" eyes. The strange and gloomy Australia in the eyes of Clarke and others fundamentally stems from its difference from the idyllic scenery in the minds of Europeans, lacking traces of "civilization," reflecting the influence of the colonial culture on the writers. Although the Australia depicted by Trench, Robinson, Kingsley, and Rowcroft is attractive, the writers all have "ulterior motives." Behind the beautiful scenery lies a political purpose: Robinson uses the name of Australia to praise the king of England, while Trench, Kingsley, and Rowcroft aim to promote the development of the colony, attempting to attract more immigrants from the mother country to develop here, and their motives are entirely utilitarian. Therefore, whether it is a negative or positive literary representation, it is a view of the land through the eyes of the colonizers and inevitably has the limitations of colonialism. The representers regard Australia as an "other" on the periphery, and naturally cannot find a real sense of belonging here, making it difficult to build a real home.

In 1851, the discovery of gold in New South Wales sparked a gold-rush as prospectors flocked to the area from all directions, leading to a historic gold fever in Australia. The gold rush led to a regional concentration of people, promoting the urbanization of Australia, and towns gradually began to emerge as new subjects for writers to represent Australia. Catherine Spence's novel "Clara Morrison," published in 1854, set against the backdrop of the prosperous city of Adelaide during the gold rush, presented readers with a vivid picture of the emerging southern city: new shops lining the streets, dusty roads, verandahed bungalows, and the unique "strange plants" of South Australia creating an interesting contrast. "Although the streets were straight, they looked chaotic. Brick houses, wooden houses, earthen houses, and stone houses were all mixed together, with no planning, appearing disorderly." [10] Such a streetscape greatly dampened the excitement of the female protagonist when she first arrived in this place.

Like Spence, Ada Cambridge and Tasma also began to represent Australian cities in their works. Deeply influenced by British romanticism, they were filled with fear and aversion to the cities that represented industrial civilization, favoring the Australian countryside and interior that represented nature over the city. Like previous Australian literature, the works of these writers could not break free from the pattern of colonial literature. In their writings, Australia could not escape the fate of being an "other," always in a marginalized position of being scrutinized and used. It was not until the rise of nationalism and the mainstreaming of nationalist literature in the late 19th century that this situation began to change in the Australian literary world.

3. Nationalist Period: bush representation

In the 1890s, Australia set off a nationalist movement "with the main content of promoting freedom and equality, praising the spirit of resistance, and establishing a national image." With such a tide, Australian nationalist literature also emerged, "which is completely different from the imitative and lackluster immigrant literature, and has distinct Australian characteristics and strong vitality" [9]. The famous poetess Dorothea Mackellar proudly declared in her poem "My Country," published in 1908:

I love this land baked by the sun,
This land has endless plains,
This land has rugged mountains,
This land is sometimes dry and water-scarce,
Sometimes it rains heavily. [8]

As this poem reflects, compared to the colonial period, the Australian writers of the nationalist period have greatly enhanced their sense of identification with this land. They began to view and represent this land with "Australian" eyes instead of "British" eyes, no longer treating it as an "other" on the periphery.

In the view of most nationalist writers, what can best represent Australia and highlight the national characteristics is still the unique natural environment of Australia—the bush. Nationalist poets and novelists represent the bush in either a realistic or a romantic tone. Like the literary representation of the colonial period, the representation of the bush during the nationalist period also shows a duality. In the works of Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton, the Australian bush is vast, with inconvenient transportation, desolate, and gives people a feeling of loneliness and desolation, making those who live in it feel depressed and depressed: "This is a gloomy and desperate path. ... The ground is almost bare except for clumps of withered grass, because it is a dry season. The countryside looks like a huge pile of ash, extending boundlessly. ... This is a barren land with withered yellow, and there is not even a howl, which would be a comfort to people if there were one." [9] However, some writers praise the bush highly. The famous poet Andrew Paterson enthusiastically praised the rural natural landscape of Australia in his poems. The bush in his works "is not as simple and pure as the English countryside, nor as exquisite and delicate as European gardens, but it appears simple, rough, vigorous, and has a unique flavor." [9]

However, fundamentally different from the literature of the colonial period, the Australian bush depicted by Lawson and Paterson, whether gloomy or serene, has distinct Australian characteristics that allow one to immediately recognize it as Australia, not Europe. Moreover, Australia's natural scenery is no longer a mere backdrop to the lives of white colonizers and settlers. In the works of nationalist writers, the "bush" is no longer on the periphery, exploited and utilized as the "other," but has moved to the center, profoundly influencing Australians living within it and playing an essential role in shaping the Australian national spirit, from which the famous "mate ship" emerges. As Lawson stated in his poem "The Shearers":

Hardship, drought, and homelessness,
Taught bushmen to love one another;
Mate ship comes from the barren land,
From toil, thirst, and danger. [9]

Between the outbreak of World War I and the end of World War II, over a period of more than thirty years, Australian society underwent rapid economic development, the threat of war, and the Great Depression, leading to tremendous changes in its social structure. Although the nationalist movement had baptized Australian writers into expressing their own voices, viewing the country through the eyes of "Australians" rather than "British," the inferiority complex in the face of the colonial power's civilization

was still widespread among Australian writers. This sense of inferiority was mainly manifested in the writers' criticism of Australian suburban life. As Graeme Turner mentioned in his monograph, both nationalist writers like Vance Palmer and "international" writers like Patrick White considered Australian suburban life to be "mediocre and monotonous," a "major flaw" in Australian society. Because of this, a large number of well-known writers and artists, including Barbara Baynton and Miles Franklin, left Australia to seek a better cultural atmosphere in Europe.

At this time in Australia, on the one hand, with the rapid development of the capitalist economy, the improvement of transportation conditions, and the improvement of people's living standards, the closed, hard, self-sufficient bush life model depicted by Lawson and others no longer exists; on the other hand, with the development of industry, the population pouring into cities and suburbs is increasing day by day, and the scale of cities is continuously expanding. After experiencing major events such as the two World Wars and the Great Depression of the 1930s, the importance of cities in Australian society is constantly increasing. However, even under such circumstances, what Australian writers pay the most attention to is still the bush. To use the "orthodox" view of the critics - the writers' preference for natural themes is a kind of "escape" from the "unsatisfactory society," a kind of "substitute." [7]

4. Post-World War II: urban representation

In the Australian literary scene of the 1950s, the cultural inferiority complex of Australians did not diminish due to the rapid post-war economic development and the strengthening of national power. In the minds of many writers and artists, Australia was synonymous with a "cultural desert," which was most evident in the works of Australian writers and artists living in the United Kingdom. In 1952, architect Robin Boyd published the article "Australia's Home," and in 1960, he wrote "The Australian Ugliness," satirizing the Australian suburban housing for its lack of character and aesthetic appeal. [1] The famous stage actor Barry Humphries' performances delved into the interiors of these homes, mercilessly satirizing and ridiculing the furnishings within and the homeowners—Australia's middle class.

Starting from the 1960s, with the development of the economy and the improvement of transportation, Australia's exchanges with the outside world have been increasing, and it is no longer as closed as before. Australians began to look at this land with new eyes, and the "regional awareness" of Australian writers has been growing increasingly strong, with works full of rich local colors emerging continuously. Especially after the 1970s and 1980s, the focus of representing Australia began to shift towards cities. Patrick White is a prime example; he once publicly declared, "Sydney is a part of my life." [10] His works created after the 1970s, such as *The Vivisector* (1970) and *The Eye of the Storm* (1973), reflect the urban life of Sydney. In White's portrayal, Sydney is a place "where beauty and ugliness coexist, can be ridiculed and satirized, and occasionally miracles happen" [10]. Kate Grenville's first novel, *Lilian's Story* (1985), also sets its main scenes on the streets and in the parks of Sydney. Others who are also fond of urban themes and take Sydney as the background include Frank Moorhouse, David Ireland, and Dorothy Hewett. In their works, Sydney is a place that makes people both love and hate: on the one hand, Sydney is the main target of their satire; on the other hand, Sydney is also a place full of hope and freedom. In addition to Sydney, Melbourne is also a popular subject for literary writers. Helen Garner's *Monkey's Grip* (1975), *Honour* (1980), and *Other People's Children* (1980) focus on depicting the life of suburban residents in Melbourne, reflecting their desire for freedom and the pursuit of "home." The poet Vincent Buckley's *The Golden Builder* presents a more imaginative portrayal of Melbourne. There are many other works with rich regional colors in Australian literature, such as Robert Drewe's portrayal of Perth, Sara Dowse and David Forster's Canberra, and Barbara Hanrahan's Adelaide.

It is particularly worth mentioning the renowned writer David Malouf. He keenly realized the dilemma faced by Australian writers in how to use literature to represent their own country and explored this issue in his own novels. In the novel "Johnno" (1976), which is about "writing," the protagonists Johnno and Dante can be seen as "different facets of the same self" [12]. Johnno is extremely dissatisfied with his hometown of Brisbane and his homeland of Australia, describing it as a place devoid of poetry:

I used to linger on the streets after school, trying to find something with romantic color or shocking power, but I got nothing. Brisbane is the most ordinary place in the world. ... Queensland, of course, is just a joke. This so-called state of moonlight is actually unremarkable, half of the place is still wasteland (it is said

that there are tigers, but no one has ever seen one), and the other half is still stuck in the 19th century... Even in the more affluent suburbs, children go to school barefoot all year round. ... Why was I born in Australia? What kind of country is Australia? [13]

To overcome this deep sense of cultural inferiority, Johnno chose to sever his cultural roots, leaving Australia to go on a cultural pilgrimage in Europe, attempting to reshape his cultural identity. Such an attempt ended in disillusionment, with Johnno unable to escape the cultural predicament of representing Australia. Meanwhile, the other protagonist, Dante, who once shared Johnno's loathing for the "mediocrity" of Brisbane, was surprised to discover that this city, which they considered extremely ugly and boring, also had a beautiful side. As he stood on the street corner in the early morning after escaping from the brothel with Johnno, he saw such a touching scene:

The huge water truck slowly passed by, moistening one street after another. Beside the flower shops in the alleys were buckets full of freshly picked dahlias and gerberas, or boxes of unopened sword lilies. ... The road was sparsely populated, the morning air was so fresh, and the dewdrops were shining... [13]

However, this beautiful and touching aspect has long been overlooked by the people living here. Dante discovered the richness of Australia in the ordinary, experienced its beauty, and ultimately overcame the predicament and successfully portrayed Australia. Malouf also shows people through this that Australian writers and artists can only successfully represent Australia and find a home in cultural terms by overcoming this "cultural inferiority complex," and striving to explore the meaning of Australian life.

From the bush to the city, from the inland deserts to the bustling port cities, the evolution of the main subjects of Australian literary representation mirrors the cultural journey of Australians from being subordinate to Britain and experiencing confusion and inferiority, to growing into independent and confident representatives of Australia and building their own spiritual homeland. It is important to note that the representatives introduced in the previous text are mainly of British white descent, who make up a significant proportion of Australia's population. However, we must not forget the indigenous people who have been living on this continent for tens of thousands of years, as well as the later minority immigrants. Due to the Australian government's "White Australia Policy," they have long been on the margins of Australian society, passively accepting assimilation in culture, unable to make their voices heard and freely represent Australia. With the Australian government's introduction of multicultural policies in 1973, their status gradually improved, and more and more indigenous and minority writers began to move from "being represented" to self-representation, writing about the Australia they envision in their hearts. Since then, the literary representation of Australia has increasingly tended to be open and diverse.

5. Conclusion

Over time, the evolution of the subjects represented in Australian literature, from the vast wilderness of the bush to the bustling cities, not only reflects the changes in social structures and values but also mirrors the deep contemplation of Australians on self-identity and cultural homeland. From the marginal representations of the colonial period to the bush hymns of the nationalist period, and then to the diverse portrayals of urban life after World War II, Australian literature has become a cultural bridge connecting the past with the present, the local with the global. It records the growth story of a nation and demonstrates a society's exploration of self-positioning and cultural diversity against the backdrop of globalization.

The development of Australian literature is the best testament to the power of representation. It tells us that representation is not just a depiction of reality but also an aspiration for the future and a shaping of identity. In this process, every individual and group has the right to make their voices heard, together weaving the cultural landscape of a nation. As multiculturalism becomes more deeply rooted, the representation in Australian literature will become even richer and more colorful, continuing to inspire our boundless imagination and profound understanding of the cultural homeland.

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