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“Multiculturalism and Multiple Points of View in Contemporary Australian Novels”

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contemporary Australian novels, multiculturalism, points of view

Abstract

Multiculturalism has now firmly settled as part of the Australian cultural landscape. Australian fiction writers have to deal with it as an unavoidable factor, without which it is impossible to make their work plausible, let alone persuasive. One of the devices they can rely on to do so is presenting their narrative from multiple points of view. Not allowing the reader to have a fixed, all-pervasive viewpoint as in traditional fiction, the technique helps achieve open-endedness in value judgements and at the same time successfully present emotionally engaged descriptions of characters. The paper will take up several contemporary award-winning Australian novels using the device of multiple points of view including Gail Jones's *Five Bells* (2011), and Michelle de Kretser's *Questions of Travel* (2012), Christos Tsiolkas's *The Slap* (2008), examining how it works for the multicultural/global world they depict.

Jones's *Five Bells* uses four characters as viewpoints: two of them are from Western Australia, and the other two respectively from China and Ireland. During the course of the narrative, the city and seascape of Sydney is a common background for the main characters' restless wandering, and in the last chapter a heavy rainfall seems to imaginarily unite their disparate lines of experiences and thoughts. However, the characters barely meet each other except for brief encounters, and their lives eventually take their own courses. In de Kretser's *Questions of Travel*, the two viewpoints are represented by a female Australian-born cosmopolitan and a male political exile from Sri Lanka. The former's life as a contemporary nomad is sharply contrasted with the latter's experience of being violently severed from his cultural roots. The novel abruptly ends with a scene of a tsunami hitting a Sri Lankan sea coast where the Australian woman stays before the two main characters come to understand each other. The reader is left with a feeling that, in spite of minute descriptions of each character's life, the narrative does not reach any real coincidence of the two separate worlds they represent. Tsiolkas's *The Slap* depicts the local reality in Melbourne suburbs in eight chapters narrated from eight different points of view. As a result, the whole book composes a mosaic of sometimes incompatible value systems differentiated by genders, ethnicities and generations. What each character finds in the end is a kind of compromise, which is

unavoidable to keep their far from glamorous life as it is.

Each work discussed does not try to present a unified worldview that encompasses different segments of the current world. Rather, the authors seem to emphasise cultural differences, using multiple points of view. The pervasiveness of such technique in contemporary literature reflects today's well-advanced multicultural Australia and shows that writers are trying to find positive values in cultural fragmentation in their society.

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