Identity: Racism In Bitin’ Back

This critical essay reviews the white reader in terms of how they might be challenged in reading Bitin’ Back through its very strong racial undertones. Discussions revolve around how the white reader may be challenged to on their racial position. A theme that is discussed throughout this essay is that of white readers assuming the position of “knowers”.

Bitin’ Back puts the white reader into the position of the subject who does not know. It unsettles the white reading position, as much by what it refuses to tell—by the gaps in its narrative—as by what it does tell. In this way, Bitin’ Back installs itself into the long lineage of Indigenous-signed texts which ‘unsettle’ white readers from their assumed position as knowers (Ravenscroft 188).

Discrimination and bias towards Indigenous Australians have created much tension over the course of history and continues to be an issue that is at the heart of Australian identity to this day. The tensions between Indigenous Australians and white Australians are wrapped up in identity, how white Australians see themselves, how they see others, and how they understand the culture. When white people do not understand something about indigenous culture, they often feel uncomfortable and confused. Frequently, it is this lack of understanding that creates tension between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians making it easy to segregate.

Another thing that Ravenscroft explores in this essay is masculinity in Australian identity. Ravenscroft writes:

It is through masculinity de?ned in terms of physicality, measured in terms of strength and endurance—drinking, ?ghting, and in particular withstanding the demands of the football ?eld that Nevil has until now negotiated a place for himself in Mandamooka. It was also through this masculinity that his mother hoped he would go on to negotiate a place for himself in the wider, white, world, or at least this was her hope before Nevil put on a frock (Ravenscroft 190).

Here, Ravenscroft explores Australian identity through masculinity and physicality which is something that is ever-present in Australian male culture. Unlike in a lot of other cultures where football can be gender-neutral, In Australia, football is clearly a man’s sport in the eyes of many through it requiring traditional Australian traits related to masculinity such as physicality, aggression, and a strong craving to experience success and acknowledgment. However, males who lack the capacity to be competitive or who simply do not have the interest to pursue sports are destined to be pigeon-holed as feminine and forced into other things that hold less significance in Australian culture. This is a serious concern for the family of Nevil as depicted by Ravenscroft as not only will he be viewed as feminine which is bad enough, but also be unable to move beyond the confines of Mandamooka into the wider white world where football would be his ticket.

Kay Iseman 'Barbara Baynton: Woman as 'The Chosen Vessel'

Kay Iseman, author of the critical essay 'Barbara Baynton: Woman as 'The Chosen Vessel' paints a different picture of Australian identity by explaining how women are ultimately marginalized in Australian culture. This is explored by looking at how The Chosen Vessel was

edited and changed to fit a more familiar and comfortable lens for Australian readers. Iseman explains that A.G Stephens, an editor, thought that Bayntons work was 'too outspoken' for Australian readers (Iseman 27). Iseman cites A. A Phillips when saying that Phillips agrees with Stephens notions regarding Bayntons writing saying that the text evokes a harsh image of the husband at the beginning of the text that is unnecessary. Phillips says that 'we only need to know that the husband was absent' further suggesting that other details in Bayntons writing are 'examples of Bayntons 'subjective obsession' about man’s cruelty forcing its way into the incidental details of the story' (Iseman 27). We can see here that Phillips is trying to protect how males are viewed by the reader. He wants Baynton to provide no evidence that the male is anything but an Australian hero. In fact, if anyone has to look less than perfect through the eyes of the reader, Phillips thinks it should be at the expense of the woman. These men find it very hard to view women as anything other than objects that can be used to enhance the story from a male perspective. Further evidence is that the woman is never given a name. The editors clearly don’t want the reader to resonate with the woman but rather, with the Australian legend, the bushman.

Iseman further analyses Phillips suggesting that Phillips is 'blind' to women except as they reflect the bush ideal. Phillips discusses Bayntons themes, as having 'the most intense effect of the lonely bush hut besieged by a terrifying figure who is also a terrified figure' (Iseman 28). However, as Iseman explains, we can recall that it is not the hut, but the woman who is besieged and the terrifying figure is certainly not also terrified. This demonstrates the overriding lack of care or even consideration that was present during this time period that ultimately reflects national identity. Ultimately, these critics would like the story to reflect national identity more through focusing on the bushman, an Australian legend, and less on the rape and murder that readers would feel uncomfortable with due to a conflict of interest. Iseman thus depicts Australian identity to marginalize women as insignificant and worthless figures.