

DAVID AND HIS BROTHER JACK -A CONFLICT OF AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY MYTH IN GEORGE JOHNSTON'S *MY BROTHER JACK*

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Abstract:

*Australian identity and interwar period of Australia during WWI & WWII has undoubtedly grabbed the imagination of countless literary minds to exploit and exalt Australian national history. The narratives that glorified the achievements of Australian soldiers ensured to synchronize these heroic events with the Australian identity myth so as to cement a biased interpretation to Australian national identity. George Johnston's well acclaimed classic **My Brother Jack** (1964) was first of the kind that questioned this by laying out bare the traumatized lives of people who had to witness the repercussions of world wars in Australia. The present paper posit to unravel how Johnston's narrative investigated a prominent yet neglected page in the history of Australia that witnessed a dramatic transition of Australian national identity from its cherished space of traditional values to an emergent space of newly acquired values that has been evolved from the ashes of World Wars is explored. Johnston through the two brothers Jack and David shows how the age old values of Jack get eclipsed by the contemporary values of David and elucidates the conflict in Australian identity where David's identity is reflecting a modern transformation to Australian national identity with renewed standards to Australian ideals.*

Keywords: *Australian identity myth, inter war period, George Johnston, Australian national identity.*

Since its settlement by Europeans the question of Australian identity has been a prominent issue that has secured a mystifying space in Australian literary narratives. The idea that there might be “an Australian identity” is one that has developed its own mythology. As Richard White aptly remarked, “There is no 'real' Australia waiting to be uncovered” (127), yet the multiplicity of identities comprising this migrant nation has regularly been homogenized by commentators and historians such as Russel Ward, who, while purporting to outline the myth of Australian identity seemed to endorse the idea of a national identity itself.

The quest in envisaging a unique national identity deeply rooted in its own individualistic stories and histories were a clarion call to Australia. This quest helped Australia in eradicating its shackles of dependency from years of British supremacy to form a mature and self-independent nation. Accordingly the so called Australian “intelligentsia” circle designated by historians, writers, journalists, critics as well as painters (White, 24) was vested with the responsibility in concocting an Australian identity. Owing to Australia's multicultural population, the creative forces often faced difficulties in describing the demeanor of a typical Australian.

The inflamed imaginative minds who presumes themselves as radical nationalists “decided that the history of Australia was the history of those influences that produced what they saw as an 'essentially' Australian character, and that truly Australian literature was that which gave expression to this character” (Walter, 13). Working along these wrong lines, this undertaking inscribed or rather denied nationalistic traits to Australia by excluding the significant yet underestimated spaces occupied by the aborigines; keepers of the oldest cultures, convict settlers, outpouring immigrant's in supplementing distinct voices into Australian life as well to participate in the space of constructing the nation's history and identity.

The lack of conviction by the intelligentsia circle reinforced them to define the whole nation by

drawing Australia's national identity to a space pronounced by the following characteristics of colour- whiteness, gender- male and place of origin - European particularly Anglo. These traits described an unreal Australian citizen because rest of the features was kept aside. But Ward observed that these qualities of “the 'true' or 'typical' Australians were” sufficed by “the men of the outback” (The Australian Legend 95) who were recreated and simultaneously typified the national image by showcasing worthy attributes of mateship, solidarity, masculinity and so forth.

This recreated image of the bushranger/ battler exemplifying the spirit of Australia undoubtedly imbibed a space into the psychic of the Australian mind which can be figured out wholly as a syndrome of instructive process. This has been deliberated from the side of literary narratives that Elder opines as strategic engagement in “narrating the nation” (Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity 8) to a fairly new re-enacted space. Thus with the passage of time the image of the bushranger and outback became a potent symbol which pushed aside other identity spaces to oblivion making the common mass unconsciously believe that the only true spirit of Australia was this constructed space reproduced by the creative tank.

This self - imposing at the same time enthralling image accompanied by the years of interwar in Australia during WWI & WWII has undoubtedly grabbed the imagination of countless literary minds to exploit this period for exalting Australian national history. The narratives that glorified the achievements of Australian soldiers ensured to synchronize these heroic events with the Australian identity myth so as to cement a biased interpretation to Australian national identity. At this crucial juncture, George Johnston's well acclaimed classic *My Brother Jack* (1964) was first of the kind that questioned this bigoted definition by laying out bare the traumatized lives of tens of thousands and more people who had to witness the repercussions of world wars in the Australian society.

The present paper posit to unravel how Johnston's narrative investigated a prominent yet neglected page in the history of Australia that witnessed a dramatic transition of Australian national identity from its cherished space of traditional values to an emergent space of newly acquired values that has been evolved from the ashes of World Wars. *My Brother Jack*, a bildungsroman novel forms the first text in the trilogy which recounts the life of David Meredith, the narrator growing under the shadow of his brother Jack Meredith in a Melbourne suburb. How with the lapse of time David eventually overshadows his brother through ascendancy to power by being a prolific journalist amassing fame, money but leading a hollow life brings forth new determinants to gauge Australian identity in an ever evolving consumerist Australian society.

Jack epitomized the privileged Australian male myth; the masculine, tough, hardworking, confident; the battler man by upholding the spirit of mateship, solidarity, beer drinking, patriotism and honesty. A stark contrast to Jack is his brother David the protagonist of the novel who represents the newly formulated morals, the anti- male myth of being coward, less moral, lucky, introvert and less patriotic chap. The nexus of conflict in the narrative is built upon the very title, which through a Foucauldian looking glass can undermine the distinctive spatial Australian identities that is depicted in the two main characters of the narrative, David and his brother Jack.

Foucault expounds that “the mirror is, after all, a utopia since it is a placeless place” (Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heteropias, 24) can be juxtaposed to the Australian national identity which forms a utopia because of its placeless space in the very concept of identity. In the mirror one can view their image in a virtual space where the person is actually absent. Initially, David failed to see his image through the mirror of national identity but instead saw the reflection of his brother Jack, the archetype of Australian identity myth who is “different from me (David). Different all through our lives, I mean, and in the special sense, not just older or nobler, or braver or less clever” (17). David personified Jack as the Australian spirit of good humor, courage, mateship, larrikinism, endurance as well as ingenuity. Therefore in the early growing years, the uncertain David was aware that he was a misfit in his society as he always measured

himself against his older brother Jack.

The aftermath of the First World War and the dreary advent of the Second World War had reshuffled the very matrix of Australian national identity. As Foucault “take the strange heterotopia of the cemetery” to substantiate how “an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion” that initially “connected with all the sites of the city, state or society or village, etc.,” (Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, 25) is pushed to the periphery of the society. Similarly, the myth that hovered around individuals like Jack is cracked down to bits when the Anzac legend is crumbled down before the multitudes who witnessed nothing but loss and trauma of war. Anzac legend celebrates the birth of Australian nationhood when the Australian soldiers fought as one country Australia at Gallipoli during WWI.

The legacy of the war is echoed in David's words when he voice out that "behind the privet hedge to occupy every room and every cranny of our mundane little house" (12) in Melbourne suburb is "impregnated ... with the very essence of some gigantic and somber experience that had taken place thousands of miles away" (11). The tremors of WWI did not spare even David's family, where his father who volunteered as a sapper was also a victim when he was gassed in the warfront. The effect of war is explicit in his abusive nature towards his wife and the “system of monthly punishment” (42) of belting Jack and David stems from the frustration of “his failure to have made anything of his life...no possible advancement in his trade” (37) after war.

The torture that Jack and David had suffered resulted in making Jack an outright charming rebel untouched by the malice or evil of the Australian society but guarding his self with moral values. But David was totally directionless, shy, deceptive and secretive who preoccupied his time with books. Jack despised David's coward and weak personality and at times even advised him to mend his ways. Moreover David's mother a nurse at Melbourne military hospital became a solace to few disabled soldiers. They were discharged basically to give room for thousands of “sick and wounded Anzacs” (6) newcomers which made Avalon David's home an abode to “clutter of walking - sticks ...sets of crutches ...invalid wheelchair and some artificial limbs propped in the corner” (2).

The Anzac spirit seeks some profound qualities like good humor, courage, mateship, larrikinism, endurance as well as ingenuity that correspond to none other than the traits that best describes Jack and the Anzac soldiers. However just like the cemetery which lost its significance, the identity myth that refers Jack gets diminished when war claimed up to 60,000 Australian lives as well as nearly 90,000 crippled soldiers occupying the household. This event has in turn managed to bring a sense of loss as well as reality to the people who earlier eulogized the battler myth and the Anzac legend. Through David's narration, Johnston was able to rupture the secrecy of the aftermath of war behind the doors of thousands of Australians to the forefront.

Foucault uses the analogy of “the museum and the libraries” as spaces of heterotopia which “begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time” (Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, 26). Sharing this idea in its fullest sense, Johnston through the character Jack has depicted the disappearance of a national myth that was configured rather away from the stark realities and traditional temporal space of the society. Subsequently WWII witnessed tremendous change in the Avalon household, where David has become a celebrity war correspondent of the Morning Post whereas Jack leads a mediocre life.

The irony that Johnston's brings out in the narrative is the contradictory viewpoint the two brothers share on war and honour. Volunteering and sacrificing his life in the WWII so as to be a part of the Anzac legend was Jack's lifelong ambition. Though David does respect the feelings of people like Jack he inwardly sees the whole enterprise as a failure that brings only loss, pain and disillusionment. Fate snatches the opportunity from Jack to be a part in the war owing to his failing health whereas fate showers this opportunity to David. David's job as a war correspondent is well praised by his family which also earned him admiration nationally and internationally. People believed in David's live war reports which in reality

were creation of his polished imagination written in the coziness and luxuries of official's camps and hotels flung far away from the war stricken places.

Meanwhile Jack covers up his failing and frustration by taking pride over that “one of us (David) is over there” (339) at the warfront and admits “that events have certainly proved you (David) right” (340). Back home David gets the privilege to make a speech from the top of the war tank for the invaluable contribution he made to his country and later he attends a march by the soldiers of the AIF division. The rhythmic movement and undeterred spirit of the mangled soldiers makes David uneasy because they are questioning the authenticity of his fame which has no valour or honour to speak. For David the marching men were not mere soldiers but “suddenly and terribly I knew that all the Jacks were marching past me, all the Jacks were still marching ... inside my brain, marching through my whole life” (363).

Through the character Jack the author poses the question whether Australia should still be described in terms of the constructed Australian identity myth that eliminate majority of Australian identities. If not, then the existing Australian identity has to be recalibrated to accommodate citizens like David who is voicing out their identity across so that they too share a space in Australian identity. Henceforth David with all his traits professes the rise of a different voice to this identity that is not inferior but is as much as an integral part of Australia as how Jack the exaggerated male myth stands.

Hence the text is attempting to demythologize the so called standard impressions of Australian type by reconfiguring the very spirit of Australian identity through the character David. Therefore at this same temporal space the author is proposing the dawn of an entirely different myth, a realistic myth of social rise and worldly success in extrapolating a new identity through David by comparing with the standards of his brother Jack. Thus this narrative marks a significant shift in Australian consciousness by honestly dissecting the structure of a family and a chapter in Australian cultural identity and history.

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