



থ্যেপিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Refereed Journal of Inter-disciplinary
Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

DAUL A Theatre Group©2013-16

Editor

Bivash Bishnu Chowdhury

Title: The Bush Ethos in Modern Australia: A Re-reading of Tim
Winton's *Dirt Music* (2001)

Author(s): Swati Roy Chowdhury

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63698/thespian.v4.1.VVRD9782>

Published: 23 December 2016

The Bush Ethos in Modern Australia: A Re-reading of Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* (2001) © 2016 by Swati Roy
Chowdhury is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Yr. 4, Issue 7-8, 2016

Autumn Edition
September-October



The Bush Ethos in Modern Australia: A Re-reading of Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* (2001)

----- Swati Roy Chowdhury

Assistant Professor in English,
Mankar College, Burdwan,
West Bengal.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'relationship' as "the way in which two people...behave towards each other or deal with each other" (1073). From this definition it is evident that relationship is something that is mutual and hence the participation of one in such an attachment is directly dependent on the involvement of the other; that is to say 'relationship' is a two-way trend where reciprocation is the key-word. If one fails to reciprocate, relationship is bound to break. In this light I propose to approach the various relationships that have been shown in the west-Australian novelist Tim Winton's novel *Dirt Music* (2001). I seek to explore how Winton has, in his seventh novel, dealt with the question of human bonding in its myriad shades especially in the life of his protagonist Georgie Jutland. My effort differs from other attempts in being an analysis of how relationships are modulated by the Bush culture. Sometimes private, sometimes public; often bitter, seldom satisfactory; occasionally sanctioned, many a times even illegitimate, Winton's novel is a spectacle of a variety of human relationships and their frequent failures to survive and I propose that such fates of relationships are often shaped by Bush ideals.



The Bush occupies a pivotal position in shaping the modern Australian notion of society and culture. Topographically speaking it refers to the rugged landscapes of outback Australia and its historical significance rests in the fact that this is where the deported European convicts settled first. In an unknown terrain, amidst bewildering climatic conditions and equally unfamiliar flora and fauna these White settlers felt the need to justify their existence and found their ways out to wipe off the ignominy of their convict past. In due course, thus, the Bush began to be posited as a natural agent of oppression against the settlers. Subsequently it was the struggle for survival against the odd natural forces that emerged as a trope for the Bushmen's heroism and legitimized their actions which were more often at odds with the humanist paradigms.

The Bush, thus, is the epicenter of the White Australian conventions of society and culture. As a consequence of the circumstances that shaped it, the Bush culture is extremely racist and sexist; racist in its denial of aboriginal existence and sexist in its fond embracing of hypermasculine ideals as normative, while relegating femininity as equal to weakness and/or destructive force. But these are stories of early settlements. With the passing of time Australia emerged as a nation in its own rights and- though quite against the fancy of the staunch believers of the Bush ethos- the gentle city- bred Australian men outnumbered the rough and crude Bush dwellers. In this paper I would like to show how, in spite of the emergence of urban Australia, Bush myth permeates in an Australian's life and how Australian literature still celebrates the Bush philosophy of life. . In this paper I would like to show how, in spite of the emergence of urban Australia, Bush myth permeates in an Australian's life and how Australian literature still celebrates the Bush philosophies of life,



society and relationships.

Dirt Music can be looked upon as a quest for building bonds and their subsequent failures because of the gaps that arise due to the lack of reciprocation and this can be studied most effectively in the case of the protagonist Georgie Jutland for she has been, from the beginning of her life an alien in most of her involvements in relationships for the simple reason that her way of reciprocation is very dissimilar from the standards of the same, accepted as common and traditional. In her childhood she was looked upon as an outlander by her siblings Anne, Judith and Margaret as their 'wild, tomboy' sibling and "it was the shopping that finally cut Georgie off from the other Jutland woman" (Winton, *Dirt Music* 168) Thus Georgie is the 'other' in Said's sense of the term extended to a considerable degree "where the most common representation of the 'other' is as the darker side, the binary opposite of oneself" (Sardar and Van Loon 13)—womanly women are good and moral, otherwise they are immoral and evil. She has been a rebel against her prominent family. Though she is a woman but her estrangement from the other female members of the family is the consequence of an alternate response she offers to their call to her for belonging to the set notions of female life. Interestingly, therefore, Georgie has all the features of a bushmaid, the tough Australian female of the outback, while her siblings remind us of the 'prim and proper' European cousins.

Georgie hails from an elite family in Perth; her father is a rich barrister, and she is conscious of being "just another Princess from the Lady Mill" (an Australian borrowing from American social nomenclature). She has not bothered to go to a university and chosen to become a nurse, working in Saudi Arabia and then travelling the world. This once again



establishes an analogy between a bushmaid and her. A bush woman is sent away from her own country to the *terra incognita* called Australia and so is Georgie. Though there is one substantial difference between the two- while a bushmaid's deportation is a matter of social compulsion and Georgie's choice to leave home is a voluntary one- at a more fundamental level both of them have to face the same predicament, that of being alien and unwanted in a society where they are born.

That Georgie is perhaps not unsuccessful in her public relations as she is in her private life is plain from Winton's comment:

As a nurse she'd copped a swill of curses, from dying men and girls in labour, from junkies and loonies, princesses and smartarses. Patients said vile things in extremis (*Dirt Music* 10).

Her impassive bearing of all the mistreatment and insolent behaviour of all her patients can again be justified as a reaction in accordance to the established convention that to be a nurse requires both patience and patients. To be a good nurse requires a lot more of the former, but a lot of the latter make it more interesting, albeit sometimes more frustrating. Her unemotional attitude is desirable in her profession and, therefore, her passive reciprocation of the rude conduct of her patients renders her thriving as a professional and successful in building bonds with ailing human beings. Georgie's impassivity is, thus, an appropriate adaptation of a bush-woman's tolerance in the face of a thousand hurdles of bush life- tough household chores, long absence of their men from home and the feeling of loneliness in the frightening bush being only a few among them. The reason which accounts for Georgie's



professional success is, therefore, the same which ensures a bush maid's survival- since both of them reciprocate to the demands of situation in expected manners.

Georgie's tactful dealings may pacify her patients, but for her stepsons Josh and Brad she is nothing more than a stepmother, however hard she may try. The way Georgie deals with her unwitting inheritance of two dissatisfied adopted kids is particularly touching and poignant, Actually, Georgie and the two children did pretty good together. But the truth is that all stepmothers are evil. It is the nature of the relationship. It is, as far as one can tell, an unavoidable fact of step relationships. That is why it is her fate to receive the S-word from:

a nine-year-old whose night terrors she'd soothed, whose body she'd bathed and held so often, whose grief-muddy daubs she'd clamped to the fridge, that she didn't even hear the sentence it came wrapped in. (*Dirt Music* 10)

The reason for such a rude treatment might be Josh's anger on being denied a 'moronic video game' but more than that it is his need to win, his desire to wound for which Josh makes an attempt to clarify her status. Another psychological interpretation of such contempt is to be found in Maureen F. McHugh's essay "The Evil Stepmother"

But he already has a mother, and I'm not his mother, and no matter how deserving or undeserving she is or I am, I never will be. He knows it, I know it. Stepmother's don't represent good things for children (256).

Since the children already have their mother, every attempt of Georgie in her motherhood is to be judged from the standards of their biological mother who is unfortunately no more, and every violation of it as a natural and inherent evil that a stepmother is endowed with. This, in



turn, is again the reason why when one of Jim's boys calls Georgie 'step mum' in a fit of temper, her world begins to slack, and she drowns herself in drinking, drugs, and aimless Internet addiction as she tries to numb the pain of disengagement- again providing us an instance of shattered relationships as outcome of improper and unexpected reciprocations. She is then like Dolly Pickle, another rebellious mother estranged from her children taking recourse to addiction (Winton, *Cloudstreet*). Conceivably the children's estrangement from their new mother is also the upshot of an ineffective mediation by Jim, who, instead of making possible the alliance between his unwilling children and his partner Georgie, further distanced them by his rash attitude and irrational behaviour.

Georgie's relation with her two stepsons reminds us of one of the ways in which the bush women were viewed by bush men- as impediments to their ways of unadulterated adventurous life, luring them back home from the bush, the only place where their valour and courage find legitimacy. In a way Josh and Brad are the new bushmen and their home is their territory where they are least willing to give entry to feminine forces. Their anger stems from being denied 'a moronic video game'- a fury comparable to the bushman's wrath at finding any obstruction; but more importantly it is their desire to win against an external force which make them call Georgie their 'stepmother' at her face. In fact her stepsons are perfect modern representations of the male camaraderie in the Australian bush culture against adverse feminine forces. The male force demands complete subjugation of the female in their putative realm and when the desired reciprocation is not achieved the relation breaks. So Georgie is abused by her stepsons who would at most allow her in their home to soothe their night terrors and wash their dirty clothes but are non-lenient in showing her the respect she



deserves as a mother and as a senior too.

Interestingly, however, even the male camaraderie suffers in this modern Australian household since the boys' kinship with their father- Jim Buckridge- is also not very relaxing. Though the children respect their father, they do not share anything personal with him perhaps because they think it too weak to share private problems with him. Once again the shadow of bush 'masculinity' seems to hover over the Buckridge family too, who, like the bushmen, consider it beyond their dignity to talk about their emotions as they find those synonymous with weakness. When Jim beats up his children for uttering harsh words for Georgie, like a bushman he shows the same masculine penchant for muscle strength as a solution to every problem. This creates a breach in correspondence causing the relation to deteriorate. This could well have been restored by the mother- acting as a mediator between the two worlds of the father and the sons. But unfortunately their 'mother' is dead and Georgie is a 'step mum'.

The relation between Georgie and Jim is also at stake. Georgie neither likes White Point nor is she happy with Jim Buckridge, the local fishing legend she lives with. Alcoholism keeps her alive in an unhappy household. Jim is the unacknowledged master of the town and also the best fisherman on the coast -"a sure locator of rock and abalone, a cash crop that is airlifted to Tokyo" (Porter, para.3). He is rich and deeply involved in his work. The character of Jim is suggestive of the older bushmen who would be content to spend their entire lives deeply engrossed in their adventures even at the cost of their families and loved ones. Georgie had helped crew a yacht that was wrecked in Indonesia, where she took up with Jim and from then she is into a live-in relationship with the Buckridge family, as a



‘fishwife’; the partner of tragic widower and father Jim Buckridge. Evidently, then, Georgie is the bushmaid figure, one who is supposed to give company to her man in distress. As a corollary, however, it must also be added that like a bushmaid she must not expect Jim to show even a little sign of gratitude by honoring her true place in his household.

Georgie’s quest for some 'ennobling impulse' to give meaning to her day-to-day life therefore, almost always meets with failures. Jim’s relation with her is particularly pathetic because of its intrinsically apathetic nature. Jim reminds us of the desired toughness in a bushman which finds antipathy towards female to be normative and justified. The romance in their association is lacking and Jim has no regret for that. Only Georgie, like a neglected bushmaid regrets the passing away of the excitement in their relation, not much because of any emotional reason, but on being the placed on the inadvertent side of her forties she is apprehensive of losing her bodily charms and pleasures:

That was late autumn. Within a few weeks she turned forty and she was careful to let that little landmark slide by unheralded. By spring and the onset of the new season she was merely going through the motions. Another man, an American, had once told her in a high, laughing moment his theory of love. It was magic, he said. The magic ain't real, darlin, but when it's gone it's over.

Georgie didn't want to believe in such thin stuff, that all devotion was fuelled by delusion, that you needed some spurious myth to keep you going in love or work or service. Yet she'd felt romance evaporate often enough to make her wonder... Wasn't that sudden emptiness, the loss of some ennobling



impulse, the sign of a magic gone? (Winton, *Dirt Music* 11)

Yet Georgie does not leave Jim because of her acceptance of commitment in a socially sanctified attachment till she finds a liaison strong enough to drive her into yet another rebellion- that between her and Luther Fox also known as Lu in the novel.

Lu and Georgie parallel one another in many ways and this is the reason of the alliance between ‘a forty something adoptive mother with a vodka problem called Georgie Jutland, and a brooding, feral, bushwhacking poacher, Luther Fox’ (Thomas, para.1) Both have memories which haunt their dreams – Lu’s memory of his family, and their tragic accident, along with his minute betrayals, and Georgie’s memories of her nursing days in Saudi, especially Mrs. Jubail, a woman whose disfiguring cancer mocks Georgie’s sense of power, and her ability to heal. In a way, therefore, both Lu and Georgie are ‘rebels’. Georgie rebels against shallowness, against the shopping trolleys of her mother or well to do infidelity of her father and goes to Saudi. Lu rebels against licensing laws, against the unwritten rules of society, and both remain outsiders, unable to fit into the wealthy but uneducated fishing community Lu grew up in and Georgie inhabits. Both are readers, and thinkers, sensualists and romantics calling themselves pragmatists. Therefore there is a perfect reciprocation in their relationship, hitherto invisible in the novel and here, for the first time, the bushmaid finds her true bushman.

The love story between Lu and Georgie may be an unusual one in a conventional framework but it is quite frequent in bush lives, which crops up mainly in the absence of one another. It is important to note here that even in this idolatry relationship there is a hint that



the bush hierarchy is maintained. The world is for the men while home is where women should be. Therefore in a seriously romantic gesture, but also a hopeless one, since he is without anywhere else to go Lu heads towards Georgie's dream island, while Georgie cleans Lu's abandoned house, and begins nesting there in a similarly hopeless manner. Both dream of the other, and explore the other *in absentia*, shaping their lives across the absence. One wonders whether such intensity would be possible in proximity, or whether the reality of life together could be so beautiful. This is the story of platonic, ideal love, and one of the most moving bits of prose in the novel is when Lu recreates Georgie with his makeshift guitar: "You're a resonating multiplication. You're a crowd. You're the stones at Georgie's back and the olives shaken to the dirt at her feet." (Winton, *Dirt Music* 388).

It is, thus, Lu's music that connects the two across spatial boundaries and we get to see that where presence causes misunderstandings, absence strengthens a bond. However, much of the credit goes to simple music which acts as a binding force in a novel whose title resonates with music.. In fact, not only is the very title of the novel indicative of their common likes and dislikes but it is a sure marker of a connection between old and new Australia. Lu's music is rustic and thus has a robust appeal. It's sheer dirt music- the raw and unrefined expression of passion that brings him closer to Georgie. But physically Lu's vulnerability in the White Point is beyond any doubt and thus he must leave the place, making the readers painfully aware of the fates of Bushmen who had to flee from one place to another to escape the hands of law.

Lu is abandoned not because he is into illegitimate fishing but because he challenges the concept of male camaraderie by going against Jim Buckridge in 'sleeping with his



missus'. The sanctity of a committed relationship does not matter much here since even Jim and Georgie are not into any matrimonial alliance but they share a live-in relationship. Georgie, then, emerges as that evil force which seeks to challenge the very foundation of an Australian society which values an all men relationship much over man-woman relation. Lu is thus penalized not for his act of adultery but for violating social conditions in a cultural set-up which emphasizes "that a man ought to be able to trust his own mate in anything" (Harris 326). Once again a relation breaks because the society does not approve of the reciprocation that he had offered to the drunken rebel of a woman- Georgie Jutland.

An oddly intriguing tale of loss and recovery, Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* focuses on an unlikely triangle among a myriad of colorful characters set against the hauntingly beautiful milieu of Western Australia. This paper attempts to show how Winton smoothly weaves a rough assemblage of highly individual characters together, united and by the common factor of keen and painful grief brought about by lack of productive communication. Many of the relationships formed between the major characters are primarily aimed at dealing with the loss of someone or something close to them ultimately yielding to unexpected reconciliations as is shown when Jim takes Georgie to Lu for their union. The paper tries to prove that, despite the differing approaches to their problems, each of Winton's characters' life revolves around their loss and their ways of coping most of the times fail because of their failures to reciprocate according to some set notions of the Australian bush societies.



Works Cited

- Harris, Alexander. *Settlers and Convicts, or Recollections of Sixteen Years' Labour in the Australian Backwoods*. London: C.Cox, 1847. *Google Books*. Web. 30 Nov. 2014.
- McHugh, Maureen F. "The Evil Stepmother." *Mothers and Other Monsters*. Northampton: Small Beer P, 2006. 255-59. *Google Books*. Web. 20 Nov. 2014.
- Porter, Peter. "Rednecks of the Outback". Rev. of *Dirt Music* by Tim Winton. *The Guardian* 8 June, 2002: n.pag. *The Guardian*. Web. 29 Nov. 2014.
- "Relationship." Def.1. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. By A.S. Hornby. Ed. Sally Wehmeier. 6th ed. Oxford: OUP, 2000. Print.
- Sardar, Ziauddin and Borin Van Loon. *Introducing Cultural Studies*. Ed. Richard Appignanesi. 1999 Royston: Icon Books Ltd., 2003. Print.
- Thomas, Sean. Rev. of *Dirt Music* by Tim Winton. *Amazon Review*. Web. 29 Nov. 2014.
- Winton, Tim. *Cloudstreet*. 1991. Sydney: Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1998. Print.
- . *Dirt Music*. 2001. London: Picador-Macmillan, 2003. Print.