

Family Dynamics and Trans-national Themes in Hannie Rayson's *Hotel Sorrento* and *Inheritance* : An Indian Reading

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Abstract

Great works of literature touch readers to their very core beings partly because they integrate timeless themes that are understood by every reader. Themes like family, family ties, sibling rivalry and land ownership touch upon some of our most basic emotional responses and make a work classic and timeless. The dynamics of family is one of the oldest themes known to the stage. In Australian theatre also plays concerning the family are frequent and some of the greatest Australian dramatists are recognized for the plays that are centered on family life. Hannie Rayson, a Melbourne based playwright, is no exception: her works express a profound concern for the role of family in the Australian society. This paper analyses two plays: *Hotel Sorrento* (1990) and *Inheritance* (2003) by Hannie Rayson. From an Indian perspective, both plays transcend the boundaries of time, space and nationality. *Hotel Sorrento*, a tragic-comic domestic drama, addresses notions of Australian cultural identity and presents the dilemmas, doubts, heartbreaks, memories and unresolved conflicts of three sisters. Though the family is located in an Australian milieu, the sibling rivalry, family ties, affection and alienation, are recognizable in the Indian context. *Inheritance* addresses universal dilemmas of land ownership: peasantry and rural experiences and urban divisions in the twenty-first century. Other parallels between contemporary India and Australia that will be discussed in this paper include the desire for land, the narrow-mindedness of many rural communities, and post-colonial reconstruction of cultural identity as portrayed in both plays.

Keywords: Australian Theatre, family, transnational, sibling rivalry, ownership, universal.

Great works of literature touch readers to their very core beings partly because they integrate timeless themes that are understood by every reader. Themes like family, family ties, sibling rivalry and land ownership touch upon some of our most basic emotional responses and make a work classic and timeless. Family issues are interesting because everyone in some way or the other can relate to them. As Sam Shepard, an American dramatist puts it, "Everything can be traced back to the family: what doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything, you know what I mean?"

Even a love story has to do with family. Crime has to do with family. We all come out of each other – everyone is born out of a mother and a father and you go on to be a father. It's an endless cycle" (Bigsby 21). Family issues are intensely personal yet powerfully universal.

The dynamics of family is one of the oldest themes known to the stage. In Australian theatre also plays concerning the family are frequent and some of the greatest Australian dramatists are recognized for the plays that are centered on family life. Hannie Rayson, a Melbourne based playwright and one of leading playwrights of Australia, is no exception. Her works express a profound concern for the role of family in the Australian society. She has written a number of intense, intelligent and often witty family comedies, which engage with Australians 'sense of cultural isolation, Australian identity, the impact of "free market" policies on education, collision between rural and urban Australia, females 'perspective of looking things and callous political psychology of Australia. Play after play she delves into complexities of human relationships, emotional and moral decadence and growing materialism. The tension between tradition and modernity, individual and society, the margin and the centre are also explored in several of her plays. Her plays decry the wrongs in society. Rayson believes, "Theatre practitioners can show spectators the best and the worst of their own desires, beliefs and behaviour, with hope of challenging or changing them" (Hadley 111). Among her plays the best known are *Room to Move* (1985), *Hotel Sorrento* (1990), *Falling from Grace* (1994), *Competitive Tenderness* (1996), *Life After George* (2000), *Inheritance* (2003), *Two Brothers* (2005), *The Swimming Club* (2010) and *Extinction* (2013).

An acute awareness of social identity enables a dramatist to move from personal life and space to the larger issues important for a society. The present paper is an attempt to analyses Rayson's *Hotel Sorrento* and *Inheritance* to look at how both plays transcend the boundaries of time, space and acquire transnational appeal. Rayson's *Inheritance* (2003) is an assessment of the realities of Australian rural life and Australian character. It is story of two farming families, Dibs Hamilton's family and Girlie Delaney's family, who are twin sisters in their seventies. Dibs and her husband Farley inherited the family farm, Allendale and did well with it but now Dibs craves to sell it and wishes to move out to city. They have three children. Julia, the daughter is a divorcee from Hamish, and William, the son, lives in city with partner Kevin. Both Julia and William are well educated city dwellers and they display no responsibility towards their farm. The third one, Neville or so-

called Nugget is adopted Aboriginal son, who is loyal, tolerant and stoic. He successfully runs the farm and has close ties with it.

Garlie Dalaney, whose husband is dead, lives nearby on a small farm, with her son Lyle, who is a poor farmer and his wife Maureen. The family of Delaney is poor and less successful. The first part of the play incorporates the celebrations of the eightieth birthday of Girlie and Dibs and the gathering of family members. In the second part many anxieties erupt regarding the future of Dibs and Farley Hamilton's farm Allendale. Both Hamilton and Delaney struggle to acquire land. *Inheritance* is a "multi-generic" (Jo 75) family drama, with comic elements, but also tinged with tragedy. In it Rayson exhibits the dynamics of family – both for good and bad. She examines the way favouritism creates winners and losers: how anger kills relationships: the way grievances may be covered up for a time and how the sins of the fathers are passed down the generations. These issues presented in a wonderful piece of drama made it such a great success in the theatre as one critic observes, "I saw *Inheritance* on Monday and it was fantastic. I also saw *One Day of the Year: The Way of the World* and *The Glass Menagerie* and *Inheritance* wins by a mile" (Crofts 24).

Hotel Sorrento (1990), now turned into a film of the same name, portrays dilemmas, doubts, breaks, happiness, sadness and confusions among three Moynihan sisters. Sisters can experience great closeness, but when they fall out, the conflicts go deeper too. Hilary the elder one has stayed at a ramshackle house, which people call affectionately as "Hotel Sorrento", with her father, Wal Moynihan, who is a widower, and her memories and some bitter and unsolved conflicts. She is running a shop in the main street. The other two sisters have taken their memories with them and are leading successful careers in London and New York. Meg Moynihan is the middle one, who is a novelist and has been in London for ten years. She is married to Edwin Bates, who is a partner in a successful publishing firm in London. Meg has just been nominated for Booker prize, for her autobiographical novel *Melancholy*, that is about her past in Sorrento. Pippa Moynihan is the youngest sister, currently living in New York. She is highly paid advertising executive.

After remaining away from each other for a long time, when they meet at their home in Sorrento, they are canopied by old memories and tragedies which coerced them to believe that for all of them life can never be the same. *Hotel Sorrento* gives an insight into the Australian family unit. In the play the family becomes a metaphor for Australia. Just as a family must look at itself in a new light from time to time, so much a nation. By providing glimpses into the tensions, differences,

loyalties and betrayals in a family *Hotel Sorrento* provides an intense emotional drama which simultaneously raises ethical and intellectual issues about loyalty, ownership, betrayal and truth etc. Through the intense unit of family Rayson is also able to raise larger issues of national identity very convincingly and effectively, equally highlighting the issue of ambivalence and unresolved conflicts in both the spheres.

Many of world's greatest plays, whether it be *King Lear*, *The Doll's House* or *Death of a Salesman* have a family at their centre. *Inheritance* and *Hotel Sorrento* successfully manage and spin around this universal theme i.e. family and its struggles. *Hotel Sorrento* portrays dissension within a family, whereas *Inheritance* exhibits clash between two kinds of rural families. Both plays display how economic pressures and changing social modes affect personal relationships in a family. The tensions among the family members are often the result of socio-economic factors. The extended family structure, whether it be classical extended family or modified extended family, as exhibited in both plays is much alike to Indian extended family structure. As in both plays, in rural parts of India the typical family unit consists of grand-parents, parents and a couple of children, with dad out working and mum staying at home looking after kids. Rural India and rural Australia have common pattern of inheritance of property. After the death of father family's property goes into mother's hands and after that to sons. In *Inheritance* William many times constrains his mother to sell the farm and to join city. But at the end of the play she transfers all the property to Lyle.

DIBS: I've done it Girl! Here – look. All legal and proper. See? I've transferred the property to Lyle (95).

In India legally the daughters also have equivalent share in property but generally they refuse to take. In the play Julia craves to stay at Allendale because she is going to have a baby but she never demands her share in property.

With the passage of time both Indian and Australian family system has gone through a number of changes since the beginnings of industrialization, and it continues to change today. Some changes which have commonly been thought to have occurred are, remarriage, more births outside marriage (e.g. Julia in *Inheritance* is secretly pregnant to her Indian boyfriend and she wants to give birth to this baby at any cost), growth of Lone parent family (as Julia is living with her son Felix), rising divorce rate (Julia in *Inheritance* is a divorcee, Pippa in *Hotel Sorrento* is a divorcee), declining family size, more child centered, and emergence of nuclear families. Though in India these changes are very scarce as comparison to Australia but they occur scantily.

Inheritance descants the divisions between city and rural ways. It shows the degree of alienation between city life and rural ways. Exactly the same thing is happening in Himachal Pradesh as in rural Australia, i.e. the city-dwellers are becoming more educated, richer and resourceful while countryside is lagging behind, particularly economically. William and Julia in *Inheritance* who are educated and leading happy life in cities, are more successful than, Lyle the uneducated but hard-working farmer, cousin of William and Julia. Lyle is suffering economic hardship. Through the play Rayson represents power struggles of the ruling elite and the voiceless minority on a smaller scale. The Hamilton and Delaney families as a whole represent two major groups that make up a majority of Australian society: the bourgeoisie and the working class. The Hamiltons have private school and university education and the Delaneys work like dogs. The relationship between the two families is one of mutual contempt just like that which can exist between classes in Australia. The power struggle over the fate of the family farm provides a forum for the examination of power structures in contemporary Australian society.

William wants to sell the farm and forces his mother to do this. In Himachal Pradesh there are many counterparts like William who seek to abandon the rural ways for the cities 'comfort and for further education. They seek to improve opportunities and lifestyles. Many children of aging farmers have left agriculture as their occupation. Both in Himachal Pradesh and in rural Australia, push and pull factors are responsible for the migration of villagers to cities. People leave their place of residence due to poverty and lack of basic infrastructural facilities like health care, education. Cities attract people because of better job opportunities, availability of regular work, relatively higher wages, better opportunity for education, better health facilities and sources of entertainment etc. At the end of the play the death of Lyle symbolizes death of agriculture. Maureen sells the farm to get money to start her political career. This symbolizes those people who are selling their rural property to get hold in the city.

The rural setting constructed in *Inheritance* is a far cry from the bush life painted in the Australian literary canon. The characters and relationships reveal that life on a farm can be far from peaceful. For Fiona Roughley the play presents, "the cruel realities of bush and of being women in such an unforgiving and masculine environment" (19). People in the bush are presented as narrow-minded and intolerant to everything which does not suit their ways of life. The setting seems inhospitable not so much because of the harsh environment but rather due to the harsh attitudes of the people. The play depicts rural people as intolerant, for example, William lives with his partner Kevin and

his father essentially regards him as a trouble. The implication is that his sexual preferences are intolerable. His homosexuality is criticized by his father.

Theme of “ownership” in the play has universal application. Everyone wants to inherit something from one’s ancestors. In second act of the play, tensions grow more, who will be the one to inherit the family property. The Hamiltons and Delaneys are divided and struggling in different ways to keep the land which should not be owned by any of them. In the play family relationships come into conflict as tensions between the generations erupt over the issue of inheritance. “The drama revolves around who will inherit the farm with an ending that is most unexpected, yet thoroughly appropriate” (Payne 16). Disloyalty and betrayal irrevocably damage relationships in *Inheritance*. Disloyalty to and betrayal of Nugget are at the heart of the family conflict. According to Martin Ball, “The perversion of Farley’s will and denial of his illegitimate Aboriginal son’s inheritance has a neat metaphor in the erosion of the High Court’s Mabo judgement” (16). Disloyalty of a father towards one daughter makes her life miserable. The breakdown of relationships in the Hamilton and Delaney families reveals the devastating consequences of betrayal and disloyalty. But not everyone is disloyal in the play.

Hotel Sorrento, built around the reunion of three sisters, depicts a family in crisis. As Rayson herself points out “at the heart of the play is the family and the sisters” (*A Sweet Pensive Sadness* vii). The unfolding of family secrets and how they have poisoned the sisters’ relationship gives the play its momentum. Rayson’s main concern in the play is the characters’ need to face the truth about themselves and the past. In the play sibling rivalry, family ties, affection and alienation, are recognizable in the Indian context. Sibling rivalry is the main crux of *Hotel Sorrento*. In the play when three sisters get united in Act II, then feelings of hostility start emerging. The news of Meg’s arrival after ten years from London bestows no solace to Hilary and Pippa. When three sisters encounter each other than initially they share their past memories but later on things start turning. Three sisters feel uneasy in each other’s presence:

PIPPA: I want what Hilary wants. And since she’s the one who’s made the sacrifice.

MEG: Please don’t tell me about Hilary’s sacrifice. She is the one who made the choice. Hilary. You made the choice.

PIPPA: There was no other choice.

MEG: She made the choice (58).

The conversation among three sisters ratifies “People coming together... reconciling their differences. It doesn’t always happen” (55).

While family relationships can bring support, joy and other wonderful benefits into one’s life, these relationships can also bring stress, particularly when there are unresolved conflicts. It is more difficult to let go of conflicts within the family. Edwin tells Meg that things have changed in ten years and thus everyone has changed also. To this Meg replies, “No. They haven’t. That’s just it. It’s like there’s this highly elasticized thread that’s tied around us three and it stretches from Australia to Britain and to the states and all of a sudden it’s just given out and thwack we’re flung back together again” (51). But Meg knows that the unresolved conflicts among the sisters are so big that time cannot heal them. So the family reunion is an uneasy one. Hilary feels overshadowed by her successful sisters and now she is planning to sell her father’s house and wants to move away. Pippa feels overshadowed by Meg’s presence, while Meg feels reprimanded and underappreciated and feels ignored. All these feelings among siblings are universal and could be seen anywhere among human beings.

In the play illicit love affairs also cause confusion, strife and hostility among three sisters. In scene twelve of Act II Meg unveils the secret which was under mask for last ten years, that she was in love with Gray, Hilary’s husband when he was alive but Gray developed an affair with Pippa. This was/is the main cause of conflict among three sisters. Generally everywhere this type of illicit love affairs engender a family feud. Sisters hesitate to share these feelings with each other and it fabricates a lot of confusions among them. Family institutions are strong in India and this type of incidents rarely happen but rather they are not improbable. So complexity in dealing with human emotions has universal connotation.

Family can be defined as a group or related people who are dependent on one another by trust and loyalty. However the Moynihan family is so broken in terms of trust and loyalty that it almost ceases to exist, as Hilary says, “What family? What family are you talking about? There is no family anymore” (86). The family is torn by the past which none of the family members were

brave enough to speak about until curious Troy pushes the limit. The sisters remain unsuccessful in resolving their conflicts and differences.

The fragmentation of the family unit is completed with the sale of the family home. The play ends with the voice of an Auctioneer selling 'Hotel Sorrento'.

AUCTIONEER. [Voice over] Ladies and gentlemen... with this beautiful location the possibilities are endless. Holiday flats, guest houses, even a luxury hotel. What a beautiful site for a hotel. Ladies and gentlemen, I offer your number one Ti-tree Road Sorrento. Who'd like to give me a reasonable offer? (88)

So the family disintegrates at the end because the sisters are divided by simmering family resentments. Each sister is ready to face the future separately. Communication and sharing are missing in Moynihan family. The unspoken feelings are so dominant, the bitterness among three sisters so thick that any effective communication is blocked. The bond among the sisters is full of distrust, betrayal and suspicion.

The situation in *Hotel Sorrento* echoes Louis Nowra's *Radiance* (1993) which is also about the reunion of three sisters, Mae, Cressy and Nona. These Aboriginal three sisters come together for their mother's funeral. In *Radiance* also the theme of secrets and lies dominates as each sister reveals a secret that she has kept hidden all her life and, in the process, uncovers the lies that have been told to conceal these secrets. Both the play focus on the need to retrieve the past—both at personal and national level for an integrated self and integrated nation through understanding, bonding and faith. However unlike *Hotel Sorrento*, *Radiance* offers a happy reunion of the family as each of the sisters discovers that like their mother, they all have victims of racist prejudices of white Australians.

Another universal issue in *Hotel Sorrento* is the theme of love. Bruce Bennett says, "Unfulfilled love, broken memories and desire for completion are universal qualities which can be most fully explored in the local and particular circumstances of individuals in their moments of aloneness" (133). This is fully applicable to *Hotel Sorrento*. Moreover the universal theme of love has occurred in many dramatic productions, be it not only the ability to love, the human need to love, but also the lack of love in humanity, and the presence of conditional love. Meg loved Gray and this remained unfulfilled:

MEG: No, he wasn't my husband. But I loved him.

That's what you don't understand. I loved him too (52).

Hilary gets infatuated with Edwin. Pippa and Gray too had an affair. All characters in the play suffer "an Australian's inability to express passion" (Mellor xiii). Wal loves his three daughters but cannot tell them. Meg loves Gray but never admitted it. Equally Gray was quite infatuated with Meg, as Meg says but he never told this to Meg. So, inability to express emotions is a universal quality among humans.

In the play "meg suffers the conflicting emotions of a love hate relationship with her country and family... Ironically, the country she has refused to live in for ten years is also the life source of her work" (Mellor xii) Hilary's character in the play substantiates the role of women in India. In Australian as well as in Indian societies women still perform the majority of domestic and child tasks around the home, even when they have paid jobs themselves. Cooking the evening meal, household cleansing, washing and ironing and caring for sick family members are still mainly performed by women. Hilary in the play does all these things.

The play ends at a dolorous note and the family is ready to face the future. At the end of the play Meg asserts,

D 'you know why I came home? Because I wanted to see if I could fit into this family again. I wanted to see if the three of us could be together. I want to know now, whether you two think it's possible?

[Silence]

You'll never forgive me, will you, for writing about something that we couldn't talk about (87).

All the emotions involved in the play are "painfully strong, very recognizable and have universal relevance" (Mellor xii). Tara Morice who played the role of Pippa in the play states, "Hotel Sorrento will probably appeal to everybody who has a family even if you don't have sisters. We all experience breaks, confusions, dilemmas, doubts, happiness and sadness" (Mellor xiii).

Rayson's art of characterization gives her plays again a universal quality. Her men and women are true to the eternal facts of human life and not merely superficial study of contemporary society. Her characters are round characters, and are full of contradictions – strengths and failings. Rayson's use of some Indian names like 'Amitab' and her use of some Hindi words like 'Pundit Ji Maharaj', 'Pyjamas', 'Veranda' are sufficient to captivate any Indian reader. The condition of literature being timeless means that it can be applied to different contexts and situations. In nutshell both the plays easily transcend the boundaries of time and space and acquire universal outlook. The plays allow the readers to relate to the characters and their struggles.

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