

Navigating Identity and Displacement in Elizabeth Jolley's 'My Father's Moon'

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Abstract

Elizabeth Jolley's *My Father's Moon* (1989) presents a poignant exploration of identity formation, cultural displacement, and the search for belonging through its semi-autobiographical protagonist Vera Wright. This paper examines how Jolley employs narrative structure, memory, and language to portray the psychological dimensions of displacement as experienced by European migrants in post-war Australia. The analysis focuses on Jolley's innovative use of fragmented narrative, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the role of memory in constructing personal identity amidst cultural dislocation.

Keywords: Elizabeth Jolley, *My Father's Moon*, Australian literature, displacement, identity, migration, memory, post-war fiction

1. Introduction

Elizabeth Jolley's literary career stands as one of the most significant contributions to Australian literature of the twentieth century. Her semi-autobiographical novel *My Father's Moon* offers a complex portrait of displacement, identity, and the quest for belonging through the experiences of Vera Wright, a young woman navigating between English and Australian cultural contexts in the aftermath of World War II.

2. Background and Literary Context

Elizabeth Jolley (1923-2007) was herself a migrant, having emigrated from England to Australia in 1959. Her fiction consistently explores themes of displacement, belonging, and the complex negotiation of identity that characterizes the migrant experience. *My Father's Moon* draws heavily on her own experiences as a student nurse in England during World War II and her subsequent migration to Australia.

The novel belongs to a tradition of Australian migrant literature that emerged particularly from the post-war period, as waves of European immigrants arrived in Australia seeking new opportunities and identities. This literary tradition grapples with questions of cultural loss, adaptation, and the construction of hybrid identities.

3. Narrative Structure and Technique

One of the most distinctive features of *My Father's Moon* is its fragmented narrative structure. Rather than presenting a linear chronological account, Jolley employs a non-linear narrative that moves fluidly between different time periods and locations. This structural fragmentation mirrors the psychological experience of displacement itself.

The narrative voice shifts between first and second person, creating a complex relationship between the narrator and her past self. This technique allows Jolley to capture the psychological distance that migrants often feel from their earlier selves and experiences.

4. Displacement and the Search for Belonging

Displacement is the central experience explored throughout *My Father's Moon*. Vera's displacement operates on multiple levels: geographic displacement from England to Australia; cultural displacement from familiar social norms and values; and psychological displacement from a coherent sense of self.

Jolley portrays displacement not as a simple loss but as a complex and ambivalent experience. While displacement involves suffering and disorientation, it also creates opportunities for self-reinvention and the construction of new identities.

5. Identity Formation and Self-Discovery

Identity formation is a central preoccupation of the novel. Vera's identity is not stable or given but is constantly being constructed, negotiated, and revised in response to her changing circumstances and relationships. The novel traces Vera's gradual movement toward a more integrated sense of self.

6. The Role of Memory and Narrative

Memory plays a crucial role in the novel's exploration of identity and displacement. For Vera, as for many migrants, memory serves as a means of maintaining connection with a lost past and constructing a coherent narrative identity amidst the disorienting experience of cultural displacement.

7. Conclusion

Elizabeth Jolley's *My Father's Moon* offers a profound and nuanced exploration of identity, displacement, and the search for belonging. Through its fragmented narrative structure, complex treatment of memory, and sensitive portrayal of cultural negotiation, the novel illuminates the psychological dimensions of the migrant experience with extraordinary depth and insight.

References

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