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Dualism of Drought and Water in Drylands**Xiuqing ZHANG**

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Abstract: This paper analyzes Thea Astley's fourth Miles Franklin award novel — *Drylands* from the perspective of the contradiction of drought and water. It depicted a fully-fledged drought and an eminent absence of water. It was the crisis of drought in the tropical small town of Drylands in rural Queensland that forced villagers to flee the arid land and seek refuge in coastal or watery areas. Characters' fate was closely related with drought and water.

Keywords: drought, water, coast, dry, Drylands, Thea Astley

1. INTRODUCTION

Thea Astley (1925-2004) was a multi-award-winning Australian novelist, a prolific writer, one of Australia's most celebrated writers. She published 16 works of fiction during her lifetime. As a writer committed to writing for over forty years, she has achieved great success in the Australian literary circle and has won the Miles Franklin Award four times, which is a feat shared only by Tim Winton in Australian history. She has won all major literary national awards, her work has been published outside Australia, academic scholarship on her novels and short stories continued to increase. She has influenced a generation of Australian women writers in her life time.

Astley's last novel *Drylands*, first published in 1999, was a joint winner of the 2000 Miles Franklin Award for fiction—Astley's fourth, shared with Kim Scott. As the title indicates, the novel is significantly about drought which makes it worth great efforts to explore and discover the background of this work. In the novel, the settings were Queensland. *Drylands* was not only a small tropical imaginary town in rural Queensland but also an indication of the background of this novel. In her real life, Thea herself moved many times from one house to another, which coincided with the stories in the novel. Her move in 1999 to Sussex Inlet caused the shimmer of activity. The flatness of the land and its proximity to the sea were attractive to both Astley and her husband Jack (Lamb, 302). It is exactly the place where

villagers ultimately chose to escape. Various drought-related stories in the town of Drylands mingled with local people's strong desire for coastal or watery areas as a refuge.

2. Crisis of Drought Mingled with Desire for Water

Australia is the driest inhabited continent, a place where periods of low rainfall lasting up to a decade or more are commonplace. The Bureau of Meteorology defines 'drought' as 'a prolonged, abnormally dry period when the amount of available water is insufficient to meet our normal use' (Federation Drought).

The word "drought" evokes images of barren fields, dying stock, and water holes and reservoirs drying to cracked mud. Shrivelled hopes, failed crops, and often economic ruin are its trademarks.

Drought is a prominent feature of the Australian scene. It is also part and parcel of life in Australia, particularly in the marginal areas away from the better-watered coasts and ranges. Of all the climatic phenomena to afflict Australia, drought is probably the most economically costly: major droughts such as that of 1982/83 can have a major impact on the national economy. Moreover, apart from crop failure and stock losses, droughts set the scene for other disastrous phenomena, such as fires, dust-storms, and general land degradation (Federation Drought).

Astley experienced Australia's most severe drought periods since the beginning of European settlement. The 1958-1968 and 1982-83 droughts were possibly the most intense with respect to the area affected by severe rainfall deficiencies.

Based on research, Australia is prone to drought because of its geography. The continent sits more or less astride the latitudes of the subtropical high-pressure belt, an area of sinking, dry, stable air, and usually clear skies. The far north and south of the country come under the influence of reasonably regular rain-bearing disturbances for at least part of the year, and the east coast is watered reasonably well by moisture from the Tasman and Coral Seas. However, over most of the country rainfall is not only low but highly erratic. Many, but by no means all, droughts over eastern and northern Australia accompany the El Niño-Southern Oscillation phenomenon, which typically lasts about a year, as in 1982/83. The late 1990s and early 2000s were generally a dry period in Queensland, particularly in summer. Droughts in the western areas and over much of the interior normally have different causes. Nevertheless, on some occasions (such as 1914 and 1994) El Niño-related droughts may extend across virtually the entire country. On such occasions, the economic and livestock losses are exacerbated (drought/ heat wave).

Though surrounded by water, as mentioned above, Australia is the world's driest inhabited continent. Most of its vast interior is arid, yet, periods of intense drought and heat are punctuated by heavy rainfall, leading to floods and monsoons (Cahillane, p.1)

Since drought was severe and intense in the tropical small town, the local the people had a great desire and passion for getting water or being close to the water for a living. There is no doubt that water is the earth's most precious resource. It nourishes all of life. It preserves our environment, sustains our communities, and is a vital input for the farming and mining industries which are the backbone of our rural economies(Queensland Government).

According to Sue Kossew, "the drought is a trope for cultural, political and psychological aridity" (Kossew 2004, p. 57). Yet, the drought, which is present in all the stories, is more than a background

or a metaphor for a tyrannical social environment. The drought is integral to strained social relations and is one of the main drivers of depopulation and discontent in the small town (Cahillane, p.4).

As Emily Potter observes, “Human and meteorological conditions in the town are strongly interlinked” (Potter 2017, p.3). Through the implied narrator, Janet, drought is told through a female lens.

“In *Drylands*, Astley described the seriously drought-stricken arid land in six stories. Drylands was a town to escape to, rot in, vanish in-cut off from other towns by gravel roads and sorghum acres and sheep paddocks (P.16).”

The first character, an accountant named Franzi Massig, when he was driving through the hinterland and dust, thought “this was a no man’s land, it would appear, the cultivated terra nullius of our founding fathers, a desolation of low hills”. He went down to the creek that ambled sandily along to lose itself in the central plains (p. 24) and later Astley described the outback as a “tan landscape whose gullies and small streams had almost forgotten the pollution that clogged them” (p.32). Dark images of the decaying town filled the escaping accountant with unspeakable gloom. The accountant’s failed attempt to assume a false identity and settle in an abandoned shack outside Drylands was foreshadowed by his observation that “The tank water stinks” (p. 31).

“The decaying town I abandoned that brown and yellow hillside, and I was heading east to the coast and north for the cape and accelerated from ancient interested eyes over the tan landscape (P.32)”. The serious drought was described vividly. “A country gawk whose father and his grandfather had worked in claypan country in drought and that killed off the sheep as fast as they put them there. The first character Franzi Massig who fled to the town talked about his story of helping his father kill the sheep that were dying from lack of feed, lack of water, bogged in the sticky glue of drying waterholes (p.33). Aridity was seen everywhere.

Another character’s story was filled with tragedy. After the fifth dry year, Jim Randler’s thousand-acre patch was worthless, unable to sustain the small holding of stock that tottered to starvation bones on lack of pasture. He sold off everything except the home paddock where the timber house groaned in the rainless air, creaked and shrank in the vertical summers (p.112). Randler’s work on the farm went on endlessly with the ploughing of the near paddock for lucerne and the culling of sick lambs who staggered blindly dying on their feet because their mothers couldn’t feed them in the drought (p.124). No money, no rain, and the weight of years. He spent his whole life on the dryland in failure and disappointment.

Due to the drought, Jim remembered his desire for the sea when he was ten. In the novel, Old philanthropies fell back into place and the far west scheme for underprivileged children who’d never been to the coast had plucked him up for a week’s holiday by the sea. For the first time in his ten years, his eyes were shocked by that moving world of aquamarine whose surface shook in repeated patterns of yeasty invitation. He even didn’t know what he saw was the sea. The moving water was not like the pictures he had seen! He was enchanted by the sea since then. In his adult years, he made dozens of visits back to the same beach, the same lagoon. He desired to escape from the farm, the heat dust poverty of his life. He sold off his land, his stock, the two farm horses, and two sheepdogs (p.127). He was driven by compulsion and the dream maggot of his youth, he reached a quiet place to pour all his dreams and funds into building a boat to take him away for the rest of his life. The passion of the dream had such

force that even after working day-long in a heat-lashed shed he left off reluctantly, cooking dinner with the mental resolution of one knowing he had to fuel himself for more work, greater effort. It took him three years to finally finish building his own boat so as to fulfil his own dream. He dreamed to escape from Drylands to water lands. He couldn't wait even for three more days. But something unexpected happened.

Toff, a councillor's son, a devious fourteen, idled around doing nothing. He had early learned to appreciate the finer points of living well. He resented his parents in a gloomily ripening adolescence and hated his classmates who laughed at him. He sought the chance to take revenge. A tiny fuse of hatred burned away like a pilot's light. He made full preparation for setting fire to Jim's boat just the night before Jim was fully ready to set sails the next day. His three years' efforts of making a boat and setting sails became a bubble unexpectedly. He was discouraged, hopeless and desperate. The anger would take all will away. With his broken dream, he started his motor and swung off down the lane ruts that would take him to the road, to the east, and to the inevitable sea (p.147). His final refuge was still water-oriented.

Feelings of environmental alienation and conditions of poverty can be traced back to the severe drought again. For the indigenous farmhand, Benny, "There was never enough water in the tanks to sustain them through the dry" (p.176). Due to the unaffordable rent, he was forced to flee the town. With the help of a white woman Paddy, he pulled up on a sandy stretch above a creek that was more a chain of secret waterholes. He hid himself along the bank of the watercourse where it swung sharply in towards the cliffs, lurching into a thickness of tree. A few metres back from the creek, a shallow cave stretched down towards one of the waterholes (p.182), there he found his ultimate peaceful place. He squatted in a watery enclave in a nearby national park and felt an uplifting sense of connection with his ancestral past as he engaged in a more direct relationship with the land, procuring his own water and food. Benny's lifestyle was sabotaged, however, by the local esquire, Howie Briceland, whose ill-concealed racial prejudices led him to report Benny to the authorities of the national park. Benny's experience of dispossession replayed older histories of indigenous displacement under colonialism, a settlement project that was uniquely driven by a desire to secure water resources (Cathcart, 2010).

In the story of housewife Lannie, she was fed up with all the boring chores of having prepared 9328 lunches, so she drove all morning and the whole afternoon aimlessly forgetting until she stopped on a small knoll overlooking Emu Park beach (p.207). Lannie was refreshed by the sea when she abandoned her husband and the family farm: "Bemused, she sat there staring at the blue water. She was beyond thought and had merely a sense of catharsis and, after that, of escape. Bliss!" (p.208). In her escape from endless family chores, she found a place where she fell asleep lulled by the steady rhythm of water breaking on the sand below (p.208). The farming condition was not desirable, for there was "a dried-out creek and dams little more than quagmires" (p.216). Meanwhile, Astley described the stunning heat that hugged people in great clammy arms.

The sun struck with venom(p.219). Later Lannie saw a "sluggish green-brown river" (p.225) in a coastal town. Since she left home, her second eldest son was actively encouraged by his father Fred to take the rest of the kids to the coast every clear weekend. It gave him a break (p.229). Lannie's husband Fred had an affair with Norma who gave birth to a baby and abandoned it on Fred's verandah. Fred abandoned the

baby again to a nurse at a hospital. He went out to the coast, driven by guilt and the necessity to obliterate thinking(p.231). For Norma, she had no money, no job, no friends. Out to the coast, she drove, unthinkingly, not noticing the scenery, unaware even of the weather, to lose herself in Brisbane(p236). It seemed that the coast was the only shelter for them to escape to whenever they were in great trouble and difficulties. Take some unknown small potatoes' as another example. The fringers who camped down by the creek were harried from farther west when their own fishing-holes vanished in the dry. Farmers were selling up, distraught by lack of water, dying stock, and impossible debts.

There was no hustle and bustle of life in the small town anymore. In the last story, the only character and narrator —Janet who appeared through the whole book, failed to realize her dream of being a successful writer. From the beginning, she narrated the outback like this: “Settle for claypan, arid plain, perhaps, a flattish hinterland with gauzy distances where the low Divide moves ever backward as you chase the paddock grasses, wire fences, switching from verdure to an ochreous sheep-munch”(p. 6). She said, “she will head to the coast and hunt for a job and maybe find someplace more suitable than this.” “I was so busy and so exhausted from working at the nursery, I would drop asleep instantly to the steady sea-snore (p.273).” Sea was an integral part of her life. She watched the empty early morning street and noticed that the town was vanishing before her eyes. Janet pointed out that “the town, as a town, was being manoeuvred by weather. As simple as that. Drought. Dying stock. The small splatterings of rain that dropped were as offensive as spit (p.287).” The town suffered from a serious drought. Eventually, it lost its vitality and livability. The empty pub seemed to have stopped breathing. It seemed that everything was in stagnancy. Villagers had been drifting out and on. Farmers were selling up, distraught by lack of water, dying stock, and impossible debts. They fled the town. For Janet, this sudden abandonment of sentimental loyalties to the town made her weepy and sad. She had no choice but to escape from this place and tried to stamp all the memories in her mind for later recollection, what was worse, she had no idea where she might go. Only that she must. In the final episode, Janet abandoned her novel and quit Drylands due to her economic desperation, she said that the victory would be in leaving (p.293). The small town was going to die.

The novel's portrayal of depopulation underlines the magnificence of water in shaping Australia's economy, ecology, and national identity. As mentioned, all the characters eventually leave Drylands. The novel is a depiction of climate migration, where poor country dwellers are “out-manoeuvred by the weather” (p. 287) and seek solace and prosperity in larger towns and cities. In Australia, larger towns and cities are located near the coast or coastal areas. Reflecting the role of water in shaping Australia's urban geography, water dictates how the characters plan and execute their escape from the small town Drylands.

3. Conclusion

Drylands' portrayal of the crippling drought of the late 1990s captured a mood of anxiety surrounding Australia's water and a burgeoning self-awareness of the catastrophic misappropriation of water for economic growth (Cahillane, p.4).

It made an intervention into dualistic water imaginaries (Cahillane, p.2). Through the description of drought and local people's hard struggling life in rural Queensland, the small town was economically

and morally devastated by drought, as a result, one by one, its inhabitants left the town in search of psychological replenishment and greater economic prosperity in coastal or watery areas (Cahillane, p.2). In *Drylands*, drought-induced migration was critical of the past and present social and ecological effects of the reckless extraction of water in Australia, what will be the future situation? Astley seemed to have given an answer, that is, the drought would force residents to pursue better living conditions in coastal areas, which was the characteristic feature of Australia and Australian life.

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