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Tempe Caxton's Quest for Identity in Dymphna Cusack's *Black Lightning*

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Abstract

The quest for identity is a universal journey of self-discovery, exploring who you are through personal experience, cultural background, societal roles and spiritual beliefs. It is concerned with life as individuals seek meaning, roots and purpose. It's an internal process of self-realisation which leads to self-realisation and understanding one's place in the world. *Black Lightning* is a significant novel written by Australian author Dymphna Cusack. It tells the story of a middle-aged woman Tempe Caxton who despite being a popular figure on television, gets removed from her job and faces a relationship breakdown, which altogether leads towards her mental breakdown. But she finds a purpose in life when she gets to know about her part-Aboriginal granddaughter and the poor living conditions of Aboriginal Australians. The paper aims to throw some light on Tempe Caxton's quest for identity by highlighting how she challenges traditional notions of being a woman through her choices and decisions and by questioning gender barriers in Australia.

Keywords: Identity, Choice, Society, Woman, Beauty, Gender, etc.

Introduction

Dymphna Cusack (1902-1981) was a notable author of the twentieth century Australia. "Her works continue to provide a valuable record of people within their cultures engaging with the socio-political issues of the particular time and place" (North). Cusack's friendship with Faith and Hans Bandler of the Aboriginal rights movements gave her impetus to write *Black Lightning* (1964) (North). The novel centres on the protagonist Tempe Caxton, a television presenter of the charm and beauty program. It follows her journey of discovery into her own family's past and the living conditions Aboriginal Australians. Initially she was a self-centred woman who was living a luxurious life in Sydney. She attempted suicide when her career and her love affair came to an end. In hospital she discovers that her estranged dead son Christopher has left a part-Aboriginal daughter, Katharine, in the north coast town (Battersby 13). Katharine's mother was an Aboriginal who has also died. She writes to Tempe through her Aboriginal family because they are forcibly removed from their ancestral land and kept inside a government reserve whose condition is deplorable.

Tempe Caxton was "very popular on television" (10) but she gets removed from her job because she is now above forty and considered too old for it. Initially Tempe takes time to come to the terms but later she finds her motive in life when she gets first-hand account of the dismal living conditions of Australia's original inhabitants. This pushes her towards the justice for Aboriginals. "The question of justice for Aboriginals was the scaffolding of the story..." (qtd. in Freehill 164). Jean Battersby comments on Tempe Caxton

that "Answering a plea for help from the child's Aboriginal family she becomes reluctantly, and then fully committed to problems which make her own seem trivial. Angered by discrimination in the town...she summons all the means of publicity at her disposal to do battle on her grand-daughter's behalf" (13).

Main Thrust

Black Lightning depicts the struggle of forty-five-year-old Tempe Caxton to find a meaning for her life when she is deserted by her lover and loses her job as a professional television presenter. The narrative shows how the protagonist is entirely alone in the world apart from the care and support of an aunt. Typical of many lonely middle-aged women with no goal in life, she attempts suicide and by fate she fails in her attempt (Peitzker 109-110). The novel opens with her return to life, despairing, embittered and apathetic. The discovery that her dead son has left a daughter (now aged five), a part-Aboriginal girl galvanises her. The child needs her help. The Aboriginal family that has been taking care for her is now being evicted from the property they have been living for over half a century. To help them Tempe must step out of the fashionable, conformist world in which she has lived till now and plunge into an unpopular struggle. She does this, and it takes her into the little-known Aboriginal community at the Whaler's, as well as into an Aboriginal Reserve. It brings her friendship with her granddaughter's people and a clear and deeper understanding of the problems of which she was completely ignorant until now. She finds a reason to live for, aware that life is going to be hard. The revelation about the

atrocities being faced by Aborigines opens Tempe's eyes to the sordid realities of social apartheid in Australia prevalent at that time. Single-handedly she fights to win justice for her newly-found grand-daughter and comes to realise that the happiest women are those without a past – only a future.

Gender is a key factor in structuring the types of opportunities and life chances faced by individuals and groups and strongly influences the roles they play within social institutions, from the household to the state (Trivedi 6). The novel also deals with the theme of gender and highlights male dominance over women and contains several misogynistic references. Tempe was often criticised for her way of living by her husband, son and boyfriend. Her disloyal boyfriend Keith mocks her work as a beauty and home consultant and television celebrity in the following manner:

The seriousness with which you took your role as supersaleswoman in the conspicuous consumption racket always amused me. I don't think you ever realized quite what a hypocrite you were. Most women don't. You wouldn't dare face the fact that everything that goes on between breakfast and bedtime is only a prelude to what you're waiting for all the time...Oh, I'm not saying men don't like it this way. The difference is that we have a life to live out of bed in which every thought and every action isn't a preparation for when we get there. (179)

Keith labels Tempe as "supersaleswoman" and "hypocrite". He says that women's knowledge to the world is limited to beauty and home only, while men have a life outside their homes also. Their thoughts and actions are far valuable than women.

Christopher thinks that his mother is behaving like a prostitute for her job. He writes in his diary that "She would have swapped me for a Beauty cure guaranteed to keep her Body Beautiful and her Face fotogenic. Beauty! How I hate the word! She peddles it like any other tart peddling her what-have-you at King's Cross - though she's getting old and ought to know better" (39-40). Tempe protests at her son's cruel thinking towards her. She had thought selling beauty products was doing something useful, although now she realises, "You're right, Chris – but not all right. I fooled myself I was doing something useful. And in selling it, I forgot that sex had a short life. Now I'm out-of-date. I peddled sex subtly. The day for subtlety is over" (40). This realisation came to Tempe after she was thrown out of her job, suffered break-up with her boyfriend and realised her son's actual thinking towards her.

Christopher criticises his mother for letting herself be physically and emotionally exploited and intellectually devalued by Keith. He writes in his diary that Tempe "has an empty mind. Any ideas she expresses are cut down from Step's old one's...So long it suits him he uses everybody – Body and Brains. And she doesn't know it!" (49). Here, Christopher is highlighting that Tempe is unable to understand Keith's treachery. He is controlling her both physically and mentally. She is only being used for his benefit. Tempe realises this too late in life when Keith marries his boss's daughter, Elspeth. Tempe realises that her teenage son in his mind "had stripped her of all dignity, judged her – and been right. How could he know at eighteen what she did not know at thirty-eight?" (49). Tempe points to her social status as a woman as being the cause of her submissive nature:

An empty mind! Oh Chris, you would never have thought the words could hurt me so! What is a woman to do, Chris? Once I left my father, no one wanted me to use my mind...You never knew how hard it is for women, Chris. Even your wonderful Aunt Lilian used to tell me when I was a girl that it doesn't do for a woman to be too clever if she wants to be happy. (49)

Tempe is hurt by her son's words for her "empty mind". Being a woman she was not allowed to use her mind. Women did not have much options available to them. Even Aunt Lilian had told her that if she wanted to be happy in life she must not act too clever.

Tempe was even ridiculed by her husband. "Robert used to tease her about her 'quicksilver wit'. He wanted to keep her that way. Keith did it more subtly, always with the implication that a woman's instinct was more important than her brain. He trusted her hunches but he was impatient of her thoughts" (49). All these statements suggest that men in Tempe's life did not see her as equal to them. Tempe points to the differences between men and women, the social constraints on women and the freedom of men to choose a range of gendered attributes such as intellectuality, masculinity, powerful, authoritative, etc. By contrast, in the post-war era women were encouraged to remain in the domestic sphere and not indulge in politics (Peitzker 176).

Tempe was judged and hated by her husband and son for living a life of her choice. She chose Keith as her partner who was younger than her. Her husband called her a "harlot" (17). Tempe thought that when she and Keith "were together, that was meaning; that was reality; that was life" (19). "Keith desertion had taken the keystone out of the ramshackle structure of her existence and let it crumble round her so that she was open to all the winds of life...When Keith went out of her life she learned that there is pain worse than death" (13-14). Life without her father and her son had continued but without Keith it stopped. Tempe asked herself, "Was she happy with Keith? She had thought so. But happiness was an illusion" (50). In the hospital "she must decide what she was going to do. She could no longer lie there using a fantasy illness as an excuse to avoid facing life again" (34). At last Tempe felt a responsibility towards her granddaughter and it gave her a reason to live for.

Tempe did many things for Keith – all their life together she was working not only for herself but for him: entertaining the people who would be useful to him, building a social life that was calculated to serve his need to know sophisticated, witty people, influential people who, when the time came, would realize that he was the man for the editorship – his one overwhelming ambition. But Keith breaks up with Tempe and marries Espeth. Also, Tempe gets pregnant five times by Keith but she had to do abortion all the time. Keith would say: "No. I don't want children. Ever. Get rid of it. It's easy enough to get rid of it" (22). Her son Christopher had already been killed in the war. Now she was left childless and barren. Keith had destroyed her power to create. The "cruelty of life that doomed women to barren middle age while their lovers fathered children on younger women" (32). When Keith found career opportunity he deserted Tempe immediately even though they were in a relationship for very long time. Tempe realises that Keith "loved power more than anything – or anyone" (183).

Tempe was in the business of selling beauty products. She believed that women should look pretty, wear nice clothes and should have an attractive personality. These things she

considered necessary to keep a man close to them. But things changed after Keith left her. The things which she was circulating on the media and among her middle-aged women fan base don't correlate with her real life anymore.

As a popular media personality, Tempe Caxton's presence at any place or event meant publicity and therefore business. "Saturday nights exposed her manlessness. In her set no woman who valued her reputation as happy and successful dared to go dining alone or with another manless woman. To go alone or with a woman-friend to the theatre was to advertise failure. She found herself accepting invitations from men who bored her" (28). Tempe termed her life as 'failure' after Keith left her. Now, she was trying to hold herself up without a man in her life. She began to fear the emptiness of women's lives. The insecurities of her invisible fans of which she had always been complacently proud began to pierce her own armour. On bus and ferry she wondered, "what lay behind the painted masks women turned on the world; what went on beneath the gilded and hennaed and platinumed casques they piled on their heads? What secret worries burned up the bodies concealed by the smart shift or the well-cut suit?" (30).

After Keith's desertion and losing her job, a new realization came to Tempe since money had ceased to be the thing by which she amused herself and became the means by which she lived. Many questions arose before her: "How did women meet the bills that mounted at the end of the week?... What would happen if she fell ill and could not earn? She had little put by and everything about her way of living was too expensive for an independent woman" (30). Rather than beauty culture, now Tempe "was in need of something that would give a meaning to living and a reason to live" (27).

Black Lightning puts many questions before us, such as - Why women have to look glamorous to continue working? Society doesn't judge men for their looks. What will a woman do if she loses her job after passing the age of forty and lived a luxurious life before? The manager of the TV station, leading sponsors and the head of the photographic studio admired Tempe for five years. But now they replaced her with a younger woman because she is being considered too old and not glamorous for the same job anymore. She no longer fit into the job criteria. Tempe's job had a deadline for her. She hated herself as the reality of her job struck hard on her. The way she presented herself before the camera now seem trivial and meaningless. She felt like she was manipulating overweight, underweight and ageing woman to buy beauty products to invest in their beauty and clothes. She now realised that looking beautiful should not be the sole motive of a woman's life. She should have a larger purpose in life.

Cusack made a white middle-aged woman her protagonist who had to lead the fight against the injustices faced by the Aboriginals. Initially Tempe seemed to be a fragile woman who could not handle herself after the breakup with her boyfriend and losing her job as she tried to die by suicide. But luckily she was saved by her aunt. The knowledge that Tempe had someone of her own blood (grand-daughter) was just the lifeline she needed in the hospital. She flew to the place where her grandchild was living and found that Kristina and the people who were raising her needed her urgent help to retain their ancestral land. Tempe went to Elspeth for help and said, "they are threatened with eviction from their home on Whaler's. It's an idyllic spot - I understand why my son fell in love not only with the girl but with the place. There's a wholesomeness about it all. The people there are not corrupted like us. I want my granddaughter to grow up there"

(189).

When Tempe decides to help the people at Whaler's and do everything she could to improve conditions on the Reserve, she was discouraged by several men. For example, the police sergeant questions her association with Hope, "A lady with a public reputation like yours surely won't want to be involved in a case of running a doubtful character out of town" (153). Keith says, "You usen't to be one to fight for lost causes" (176). He rebukes her for "indulging in maternal sentimentality about a son who's been dead six years". He even calls her "mad woman, quite mad" (178) and says her plan for Kristy and her people was an "idiotic grandmotherly idea" (179). But all these discouragements failed to divert Tempe from her goal of helping Aboriginals.

When Keith denies helping her, Tempe goes to Elspeth, the only daughter of the proprietor of the Globe newspaper. When she offers to help her through money, Tempe says, "This isn't a question of money...This is a question of stirring up public opinion to stop what may be happening even while I'm talking to you here. The only way that can be done is through a newspaper" (190). Elspeth convinces her father to help Tempe. Tempe tells Elspeth, "I wonder if you'll understand what it means for a woman who thought that she was alone to find out suddenly that she has a grandchild. To be lonely is a frightening thing...Don't be misled by the glamorous façade. It's very nice to look at but not very satisfying. My stock in trade isn't a lasting one. A woman needs more than that when she's facing middle age" (189).

As a newly emboldened woman, Tempe Caxton, with the help of Elspeth and her father garnered media attention towards the atrocities perpetrated on Aboriginals and rescued the property of Aboriginals at the Whaler's. Tempe is subsequently offered a new position in David Robertson's media empire which she accepts as her workplace would be close to the place where Kristina is staying. Towards the end of the novel Tempe "in sudden illumination saw herself as part of the long bitter struggle in which they were all involved. It was then she knew that her future would be rooted in something even deeper and wider than Kristy's love" (207).

Conclusion

In the beginning, Tempe Caxton's life only revolved around her beauty programme and her boyfriend. She was living a luxurious and glamorous life in Sydney. She didn't know until she came to the Reserve the suffering of marginalised community - Aboriginal Australians. The revelation of her part-Aboriginal grand-daughter changed her perspective on life. She starts acting as a catalyst for bringing justice to Aboriginal people. She raised her voice for equal treatment to all Australian citizens. In adverse circumstances she found her true identity that is to uphold the values of humanity. At the same time, she also realised that a woman does not need a validation from a man to live her life. She saw a life outside the glamour of Sydney. The pathetic situation in which Aboriginal Australians were living reveals a grim reality of her own country. Being an influential person in Australia, she did everything she could to stop the wrongdoings in her society.

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