

Thea astley's it's  
raining in mango



A literary text often acts as a reflection of the society of the time in which it was written. The particular value systems or ideologies of the characters and character groups represented in the text inform the reader of those characters' cultural identities. In Thea Astley's *It's Raining in Mango*, the author offers many representations of cultural identity. Through the story of the Laffey's, Astley provides an alternative to the mainstream society's representation of cultural identity and challenges traditional beliefs regarding Australia.

*It's Raining in Mango* is set in Australia, and follows the story of the Laffey family from 1860 to 1980. The characters endure some of the major events in Australia's history, such as the gold rush of the 1860s, the depression, both World Wars, and the horrific treatment of the Aboriginal population. From these events came the 'Australian identity'; what mainstream society believed to be the traits and characteristics unique to the 'typical' Australian. From the First World War sprung the legend of the heroic ANZAC, and Australians were regarded as the resilient 'battler' with a strong sense of humour and laid-back attitude.

Camaraderie and mateship were highly valued. The patriarchal ideologies of the society meant that women were expected to be submissive, and function solely in the domestic sphere, while men were the providers and "bread-winners". Aboriginals and other minority groups were marginalised or silenced. The value systems and ideologies that inform the representation of mainstream Australian society's cultural identity are represented in Astley's text by characters such as the diggers, who believe that the Aboriginal

people are "not human" and the pub owner "who hated blacks, but loved their pay checks".

Other characters who represent the patriarchal values of the society are the priests with whom Jessica Olive and Connie conflict with. However, the strongest representation of the values and ideologies of this society are reflected through the police, the figures of authority who find it "in order to blame a blackskin. The easy way out". All these characters, along with the men looking for work during the Depression, reflect the values and ideologies of mainstream society, which inform representations of the cultural identity of Australians.

However, through the Laffey family and other character groups, Astley offers an alternative representation of cultural identity. The women in Astley's text offer an alternative to the cultural identity of women in mainstream society. Unlike the women represented in the ideologies of this patriarchal society, the female characters in *Mango* display strength and independence. Jessica Olive begins as the passive, submissive wife and mother idealised by mainstream society, however moves to challenge this notion after Cornelius leaves and she is left to become the "manageress extraordinaire".

She shows strength, passion and determination when facing hardships, or challenges to her values from characters such as the boarder at her hotel, and Father Madigan. Connie also proves her independence and strength of character throughout the text. As a child in a convent, Connie has difficulty suppressing her sexuality "and for one silly week she flattened her gently erupting breasts with a broad ribbon band", and then as an adult she goes

on to become a strong, self-reliant single mother. Connie, like Jessica Olive, displays passion and determination when she conflicts with another priest, Father Rassini.

Mag is another character whose values and beliefs give an alternative to the mainstream notion of cultural identity. When she hides Nelly and her baby from the authorities, Mag displays courage and defiance, and the fact that she speaks for George, her husband, reflects power and strength of character. The prostitutes in the text also show very strong independence and courage, and their value systems and ideologies inform a representation of cultural identity that challenges the identity ascribed to prostitutes by mainstream society.

The value systems and beliefs of the female characters in this text create a very different representation of women's cultural identity in Australia than that ascribed to women by the mainstream patriarchal society of the novel. They create a new cultural identity for women, that of the strong, independent woman. These women have a very strong connection to the land, and place family at the centre of their value system, as do most of the main characters in the text. The centralisation of family in the story of the Laffey's is very important in the construction of an alternative cultural identity.

Unlike the characters that represent mainstream society, whose families are not mentioned, the Laffey's have a strong, profound bond. They represent values and attitudes similar to those found in Aboriginal culture, those of respect for, and reliance on, the family. Connie recognises that " only the

family as she knows it has cohesion, provides a core". She understands the unbreakable bond between her family throughout the centuries, and the fact that they are inextricably linked to each other by the knowledge that they are Laffey's.

The bond between Connie and Will reminds the reader of the importance of family in a time when many families were being ripped apart by the tragedy of the Second World War. For the main characters, the family home in Mango is their place of return, a place to come back to for sanctuary and security. This emphasis on strong family values informs the reader of a cultural identity that is very different to the one offered by mainstream society, in the text. Along with a strong family connection, the main characters also have a strong connection to the land.

While the settlers in the text saw the land as something to be battled with, the Laffey's learnt to harmonise with the land, and see it as something to be protected. Reeve represents the values of the Laffey family through his acting out as a conservationist, and Clytie and Harry's struggle to save their farm during the Depression displays their concern for the land. It is this connection to the family and the land, similar to Aboriginal values, that sets the Laffey family's representation of cultural identity apart from that of mainstream society.

The value system and ideologies of the Aboriginal characters, and other characters, inform the reader of the cultural identity of the Aboriginal people. The mainstream society of the text views Aborigines as savage, "no-hoper(s), river-tribe layabout(s)". This view is clearly expressed throughout

the text; by the diggers who callously slaughter the "blackskins", the pub owner, the police, and especially by the gang in the bar who beat Billy and his family.

The Aboriginal population is marginalised by mainstream society. However, Astley, by privileging the point of view of some of the Aboriginal characters, and creating main characters who sympathise with, and share some beliefs and values with the Aboriginal people, has created a cultural identity that is different from that of mainstream society's beliefs. Aboriginal culture places great emphasis on the unity of the family, and this value is evident in Astley's text.

Nelly is willing to run, and risk being hunted down, to keep her child, and Billy's first concern is his father when they are attacked in a bar. The very strong Aboriginal connection to the land is also evident in *It's Raining in Mango*. The way the land is described by the Aboriginal characters is beautiful and serene, with its "hill(s), grey scrub against blue, the long grasses dry before the big rains", and shows an understanding of the nature of the earth.

Bidiggi automatically reaches for the earth to comfort him when his tribe is slaughtered, hiding in the water grass and falling asleep under a paperbark. These Aboriginal notions of family, and their connection to the land, provide a representation of cultural identity. The attitudes of other characters also affect the representation of Aboriginal cultural identity in this text. The Laffey family, who are centralised in the text, sympathise with the plight of the Aboriginal people.

Cornelius is fired because he writes an article exposing the shocking treatment of Aboriginal people, the child George believes that Aborigines are just the same as white people, Mag and George protect Nelly and her baby, and Will tries to help Billy in the bar brawl. Because these characters are all centralised, and the reader is encouraged to agree with their values and attitudes, the reader is positioned to see the Aboriginal people as humanised, which provides an alternative representation of cultural identity to that offered by mainstream society.

Other character groups are also represented in it's raining in mango, and their value systems and ideologies inform the reader of their cultural identity. These groups are the soldiers, the hippies, and the cult members. The myth of the resilient, laid-back Australian soldier is destroyed in Astley's text, and replaced instead with the image of a shattered, broken man, plagued by what he has seen. Will's experience of the war, and how he deals with it, are not the same as the romanticised identity created by mainstream society.

Will is instead constantly disturbed by the horrific images of his experiences at the front, and though awarded for bravery, he throws the medal in the rubbish because he does not believe that he deserved it. Thus, through Will's reaction to the war, Astley again offers an alternative to the cultural identity created by mainstream society. The hippies are represented as lazy, careless, and free. They believe in love, peace, and freedom, and regularly smokemarijuana.

The hippies don't have real names, and they are constructed as drifters, travelling and moving whenever the mood seizes them. The values and ideologies of the hippies create their cultural identity, however their attitudes and actions are hypocritical, and position the reader to question the validity of the hippies' cultural identity. The members of the cult are constructed as surreal, surrounded by a blue haze. The reader sees them through the point of view of Connie, and the odd characters are almost satirised.

Astley uses the cult to make another attack on institutionalised religion, suggesting that they are no better than the Father Madigans or Father Rassinis of the world, as they place their absolute faith in the intangible. Their inability to act in an emergency, such as when Connie saves the drowned man, highlights the ineffectiveness of their beliefs. The cult members' representation of cultural identity is informed through their value systems and ideologies, and is used by Astley to comment on the ineffectiveness of having faith solely in the divine, and no faith in self.

In Thea Astley's *It's Raining in Mango*, the author has revealed several representations of cultural identity. She has revealed the cultural identities created by the mainstream society of the text, and then offered alternatives to these assumptions through the story of the Laffey family and other surrounding characters. The value systems and ideologies of these characters are what create the cultural identities for these groups.