

MISFITS IN TIM WINTON'S *BREATH*

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Abstract

*Tim Winton, in his novels and short stories, depicts misfits such as odd, eccentric, lonely, deviant and marginal characters who strive to find some meaning in their life. Therefore, the present research paper aims to study the portrayal of misfits in Winton's novel entitled *Breath*. Nearly all the characters in the novel are unhappy and broken in one way or another. They try to overcome their inner suffering but they invariably carry on with their respective shabby or flawed lives. Hence, this topic offers a great scope for further research.*

Keywords: misfit, odd, isolated, eccentric, deviant, marginal characters

Tim Winton, born in 1960 in Perth, is one of the best Australian novelists and short story writers. He is one of the most popular and successful contemporary Australian writers. He has published a wide range of bestselling novels and short stories since the publication of his first novel *An Open Swimmer* in 1982. He has to his credit nine novels, four short story collections, three non-fictional prose works and seven books for young readers. Many of his narratives have a surfing theme and they invoke white masculinities through the lens of surf culture. His narratives are accurate representations of social reality at a given time. He has always lived in coastal places, Scarborough or Fremantle. From his novels and short stories and criticism, his work shows interest in the coastal and rural places in Western Australia depicting misfits such as odd, eccentric, lonely, deviant and marginal characters who strive to find some meaning in their

respective life. Therefore, the present research paper aims to study the portrayal of misfits in Tim Winton's novel entitled *Breath*.

Winton's *Breath*, published in 2008, is a contender for the great surfing novel. Winton nostalgically cherishes the time of the 1970s in this novel. He, a keen surfer, writes about surfing with an insider's knowledge and an unparalleled lyrical beauty. His devotion to the sea, its ever-present influence on and in his life, is put to great use in its evocation of the primal presence of the sea in all its beauty and peril. Winton has drawn on his own experiences as there are evocating descriptions of sea and the surfing experiences. He has created a tremendously powerful story that will have a strong impact on the mind of the readers for a long time. He has achieved a new level of mastery in this short and fresh novel. *Breath* confirms Winton as one of the world's finest storytellers, a writer of novels that are at the same time simple and profound, relentlessly gripping and deeply moving. It is both a hymn to the beauty of flying on water and a realistic assessment of the costs of losing one's balance in every sense of the word 'breath'.

Winton's *Breath*, set in the 1970s in a small fictional town called Sawyer, is a novel about life, friendship, experimentation and regret. It is also a novel about boundaries, risk-taking and survival. It is a story that not only deals with the typical coming-of-age themes but also a story that deals with the concept of fear and the nature of accomplishment. It is concerned with major issues such as adolescence and manhood, place and environment, life in Western Australia, identity, culture and politics. It explores the limits and potential of human fear. It also explores female sexuality, gender ascription and anxiety produced by women who dare to transgress through unconventional or deviant sexual practice. It is a book about risk, about finding a balance between being ordinary and extraordinary. It is an extraordinary evocation of an adolescence spent resisting complacency, testing one's limits against nature, finding like-minded souls and discovering just how far one breath will take you. It is a story of extremes — extreme sports and extreme emotions. The novel was greatly praised by the readers and critics as well. It topped the best-seller list in Australia. It won the 2008 inaugural Indie Prize and The Age Book of the Year Award. It also won Miles Franklin Award, the most prestigious Award in Australia.

Winton's *Breath* explores the boys' youthful urge to seek out the farthest limits of courage, endurance and sanity in an attempt to escape the ordinariness of their lives. It is a story

of risk, of learning one's limits by challenging death. The act of breathing and its awareness as the prime source of life are central to the actions of the characters. Winton's characters reveal a barely hidden passion for non-existence, and death lingers at the fringes of almost every scene in this novel. Nearly all the characters in the novel are unhappy and broken in one way or another. They try to overcome their inner suffering but they invariably carry on with their respective shabby or flawed lives.

The novel is set as a flashback. Bruce Pikelet is the narrator protagonist of this novel. He gives up his desire to surf the Nautilus, the biggest wave, and takes recourse to family life. His friend Karl Loon surf the gigantic waves and challenges death but he is shot dead in Mexico for a drug-deal gone wrong. Eva, Sando's wife, is finally found dead as a result of asphyxiation, alone in a Colorado hotel room. Sando is left to suffer in loneliness for the rest of his life. Thus, the life stories of these misfits offer a great scope for further probe. Hence, in the foregoing part of this research paper, the life of each character is studied with the intention seeking some sort of meaning.

Bruce Pikelet can be considered as a misfit as he involves himself in dangerous life hacks and shows his deviant nature. He is a middle-aged ambulance driver at the opening of the novel. He is reminded of a pivotal point in his youth after attending the accidental death of Aaron, a teenage boy. He remembers his childhood and adolescent days spent in Sawyer, a small mill-town. Pikelet, son English migrants, was an awkward young teenager. As a child he strongly craved to swim in the vast sea. He hankers after the sea than anything else. However, his parents forbade him from going near the sea. His parents were affectionate but ineffectual. They were fearful not only of the surrounding bush but also of the nearby ocean. Pikelet, being an obedient child, found it difficult to break the parental bondages. He thinks that there is no room for beauty and challenge in the lives of the people in Sawyer. He thinks that life in the town is drab and dreary. He, being lonely and solitary by nature, avoids all kinds of team sports and excels only in swimming in the local river. During the years at Ag School, Pikelet gets attracted towards Queenie Cookson. However, his affair lasts for a short period only. He can not sustain his interest in her for a long time. Queenie complains of Pikelet's inattentive nature and relieves him of his duties as a boyfriend.

Pikelet defies his parents after befriending Loonie, a freckly sort of kid who enjoyed causing riverside fear among the people by his skill of drowning under deep water for a long time. Bruce Pikelet and Karl Loon or Loonie, both 12 years old, dare each other to perform dangerous stunts in the local river at the expense of the school. They competed with each other to hold their breath under water. They competed to break the two-minute limit challenge beneath the diving board. Their rivalry increases and they figure out extreme risks. They become more skilled and their exploits become more reckless. With their adventures they feel as if they have moved up in the world. They feel proud of their maverick status. They were under the illusion of what they were doing was extraordinary. They yearned to swim in the vast ocean. They chop wood in order to earn money so that they could buy surfing boards. Pikelet, neglecting his parents' advice, goes to the ocean. He catches a glimpse of the ocean for the first time and he senses a power beyond the self, both fascinating and terrifying. He is drawn by the sheer beauty of surfing:

From the granite headland whose rocks were daubed with warnings about the dangerous current, the beach stretched east for miles. We watched the surfers plunge into a churning rip alongside the rocks and from there they shout out toward the break. Waves ground around the headland, line upon line of them, smooth and turquoise, reeling across the bay to spend themselves in a final mauling rush against the bar at the rivermouth. The air seethed with noise and salt; I felt giddy with it. (22)

The bravura of Pikelet and Loonie attracts the attention of Sando, a surfing champion. Pikelet, Loonie and Sando form an unlikely trio. Together, the three begin a kind of adventure club where they aim to both increase their surfing skills and take on increasingly dangerous challenges in the surfing. They visit different places in search of riding bigger waves. They enjoy certain underground reputation. They enjoy enigmatic status among the surfers. However, the kind of reserve enters in the friendship of Pikelet and Loonie alongside their achievement in surfing. The rivalry between them grows stronger and more sinister as Sando's attention and favour flip-flop from one boy to the other. Pikelet's refusal to surf the Nautilus, the biggest wave, introduces a shift in the friendship. He thinks it stupid to surf such a huge wave. He confesses his fear of the Nautilus:

I was gutted by that day at the Nautilus. A small, cool part of me knew it was stupid to have been out there trying to surf a wave so unlikely, so dangerous, so perverse. What would success there really mean — perhaps three or four or even

five seconds of upright travel on a wave as ugly as a civic monument? Surely there were better and bigger waves to ride than that deformity. Yet nothing could assuage the lingering sense of failure I was left with. (146)

Sando and Loonie's surfing of the Nautilus solidifies their bond and they travel together in foreign lands in search of bigger risks and more intense thrills. They, without informing Pikelet, leave for Java in search of bigger waves.

Pikelet, left behind alone, becomes friendly with Eva, Sando's wife. Pikelet and Eva discuss the place of thrill-seeking in their lives. Their friendship soon takes a sexual turn. Though Pikelet is only fifteen years old, he enters into sexual relationships with twenty-five year old Eva Sanderson. He speaks of his first sexual encounter with Eva:

I shoved off my damp jeans and clambered onto the bed and kissed her inexpertly. Eva's hair was unwashed and her mouth tasted of hash and coffee. Her fingers were stained with turmeric. She smelled of sweat and fried coconut. She was heavier than me, stronger. Her back was broad and her arms solid. There was nothing thin and girly about her. She did not close her eyes. She did not wait for me to figure things out for myself. (161-2)

Pikelet remains weird night and day for a week after his first sexual encounter with Eva. When he looks at the girls in his school, he compares them to Eva. At night he feels that Eva is waiting outside for him. He starts spending all his free time at the house with Eva in the woodshed, in the bathtub and in the bed. He feels mad, reckless and doomed after his sexual encounters with Eva. His feelings for Eva range from lust and love to repulsion and concern. He finds it difficult to control his lust. He visits Eva and the two make love in the shadows of the undercroft. After the sex, neither Pikelet nor Eva pretended to be happy. Thus, Pikelet's boredom, loneliness, listlessness and feelings of ordinariness push him into a sexual pattern with Eva:

And so began a pattern. Eva always seemed more vindicated than pleased to see me. Sex was a hungry, impatient business, more urgent for the looming possibility of Sando's unscheduled return. The house had no curtains and few partitions so it was hard not to feel insecure. Sando's dog was a constant and mostly silent witness; it saw me eager, clumsy, exultant, furtive, anxious. (167)

Pikelet, thus, seems to be utterly confused sort of person. When he is with Eva, he feels elated, miserable, greedy and grateful at the same time. He becomes obsessed with the thoughts of Eva. Pikelet and Eva, one day, made love in the bracken beneath the karris. Thus, passion runs

out of their control and they establish a pattern of enjoying sex in Sando's absence. He watched her when she was present and imagined her when she was not. He recalls:

I watched her so long that I saw her body was a sequence of squares and cubes. Her teeth were square, so were her ears. Her breasts and buttocks were block-like. Even her calf muscles, which squirmed beneath my fingers, had corners. She had wide, blunt hands with square nails and deep ruts at the joints, and her feet were the same... How I watched her, what a catalogue I made of her movements. I saw her pee, watched her shave her armpits. She said I was a pervert and I wondered if I was. (174-5)

Pikelet, in his relationship with Eva, behaves like a perverse. However, after the death of his father in a freak accident, he realizes that there is no room for any stupid risks. In due course he becomes a lab technician in the university. He marries Grace Andrews who teaches in the department of Zoology and they had two daughters. He is described by his colleagues as having a classical addictive personality. However, the things went wrong between Pikelet and Grace. His ill-advised marriage lasts for short time and the two get divorced. Pikelet fails to understand both Eva and Grace. He is left stranded in speculations about their feelings, thoughts and intentions. He was euphoric and never happier in his life. Hence, he can be called as a misfit. At the end of the novel Pikelet reflects on a life marked personal loss, a broken marriage, physical and mental breakdown and some sort of parlous redemption:

I didn't exactly pull myself together — I got past such notions — but bits of me did come around again, as flies or memories or subatomic particles will for reasons of their own. Bit by bit I congregated, I suppose you could say, and then somehow I cohered. I went on and had another life. Or went ahead and made the best of the old one. (211)

Karl Loon or Loonie can be called a misfit. Loonie is aptly named boy with a penchant for daredevilry. He is the sort of fearless madman who is both hero and fool driven to take ever crazier risks in surfing and in life. He, the school dropout, cares nothing but surfing only. He becomes more and more reckless in surfing and faces twenty-foot waves with contemptuous defiance. He, energetic and zestful, liked more risky games and invented some of his own. He, in his competition with Pikelet, always volunteered to go first as he seemed to be greedy about risk. He takes the most dangerous risks that Pikelet and Sando watch in awe. He wants only bigger and bolder thrills in his life.

Loonie's family has fallen apart. His mother has eloped with other man and his father consoles himself with the other women. Loonie is greatly affected by his dysfunctional family. Deprived of parental control he is free to do whatever he likes. He is a mouthy urchin who had fight most often with other boys during the year at Ag School. He, the son of the publican, lived in the pub. He had to wash glasses and sweep at the pub as he could not do any other work. He stole bottles from the pub and looted money from the guest rooms. He watched from spyholes in the pub. He once noticed Margaret Myres having sex with a man who turned out to be his father. He worked in the mill for the time being but he was sacked from the mill very soon. He, then, lived with drug scams and smuggling. He brings hash from his surfing trips. He was involved with the wrong cops. He becomes the destroyer of himself and others through his drug trafficking. He was shot dead in a bar in Mexico for some kind of drug-deal gone wrong.

Sando, Eva's husband, can be considered as a misfit. He is a big and muscular man, with grey eyes and steely glare. He is ten years older than Eva but he is very strong and lovely. He is glamorous in his sun-bleached way. He, a reclusive surfer, has surfed all over the world. He has international surfing credentials. He is able to pursue his passion for surfing going on long trips throughout the Asia-Pacific region. He left home quite often that Eva has to live a lonely life. He travelled all over the world in search of extreme surfing challenges.

Sando recognizes the daredevil wildness of Pikelet and Loonie and takes it upon himself to teach them to surf. He, a charismatic surfing legend, mentors the boys in the science and art of surfing. He enjoys the status of guru for the boys. He enjoys the boys' hero-worship of him. He sustains their interest in him. However, he was an enigma for them. His role extends from the ideal surfing guru to the destructive and despicable person responsible for Loonie's submission and risk-taking behaviour. He leads the boys into increasingly frightening situations as they pursue the ultimate in challenging breaks. He brings jealousy among the friends as he takes Loonie only on a surfing tour through the Pacific Islands.

Eva, the only fully developed female character in the novel, can also be called a misfit. She is the abrasive American wife of the older surfer Sando. She was once a freestyle skier. She was popular more for her death-defying acrobatics than for skill or finesse. She had an accident during a tournament. This accident ended her career as a former freestyle skiing champion. It had left her physically disabled with a broken knee. She is barely able to walk after the accident and

consequent many surgeries. She has given up all hopes of pursuing a skiing career. She leads isolated life in a beach house. She leads a stagnant life, both physically and psychologically. She lives unhappy and dissatisfied life. She isolated herself from the community of Sawyer. This increases her level of alienation and frustration. Thus, she is lost, disappointed and depressed wife who is dependent on her husband.

Eva, however, affirms her existence in the society through her masochistic affair with Bruce Pikelet, a fifteen year old school boy. She lives the hippie-culture passionately and, thus, defines herself outside of social norms. She takes more pills and smokes so much hash. Her bodily appearance draws Pikelet into a spell of sexual fascination, excitement and terror. As Sando becomes guru to Pikelet in surfing, Eva becomes a guru to Pikelet teaching him not only the pleasure of sex but also breath-defying games. She involves in Pikelet with pure self-interest. Her love-making is self-gratifying. She uses Pikelet as a substitute sex object in order to take revenge on her absent husband. She seems to be obsessed. She once takes Pikelet for a drive in her car. She, unable to control herself, makes Pikelet to have sex there in the noonday car park. They, after return home, smoke hash together and make love once again. She, after pregnancy, expresses her hatred for sex with the baby coming on and, one day, slaps Pikelet. Eva is an enigma. She has plenty of secrets of her own and becomes increasingly involved in Pikelet's life. She introduces Pikelet with her game of asphyxiation. She gives control over her body and life to Pikelet. She asks him to perform potentially lethal acts with and on her.

Eva, thus, can be called a desperate paedophile. She disturbs the social order. Her behaviour can be seen an unthinkable. She is characterized as pathetic, self-obsessed and painful. She is depicted as emotionally unhappy and physically scarred. She is portrayed as being expert in sex, betrayal and seduction. She is lacking in emotion, conscience and sensitivity. She is responsible for Pikelet's disturbed mental state. She takes what she wants without much consideration of the consequences. She dies ambiguously. It is not clear whether it results from either accidental loss of control during self-strangulation or from intentional suicide. She can be held responsible for everything that goes wrong in the life of men she approaches. She is indifferent towards her conventional roles in the household. She marks as destructive and unsettling forces for her family. Winton, however, thinks that Eva is not a destructive female character. He points out in an interview with Salhia Ben-Messahel:

Eva is thwarted person. She's bored, she's frustrated, she's in pain, and she feels neglected by Sando, especially when he starts disappearing to Indonesia for long stretches with Loonie. Her erotic involvement with Pikelet is a kind of false refuge, a form of vanity that many adults submit to in the presence of those younger, poorer, weaker and more naïve than themselves. She doesn't set out to seduce the kid but neither is she ignorant of the impropriety once things develop between them. Yet she allows it to happen. She doesn't mean him any harm — and this is often the case with adults who involve themselves with younger people. (Antipodes P 11)

Sando and Eva, the husband and the wife, seem to make an odd couple. The two met in a party on the North-shore of Oatu. They differed in temperament as Sando did not like much cold and the sea made Eva uneasy. They stand in complete contrast with each other. Eva is psychologically unstable and aggressive woman whereas Sando is the type of happy-go-lucky man. However, each instinctively recognized the other's obsession. They enjoyed sex sensuously. They had a great time together for a short while. They made love and drank in merriment. They never speak about making a living. They never bothered about money. They were blessed with a trust fund which freed them from financial worries. They lived a comfortable life and pursue their hippie-culture without much consideration of financial issues.

Sando had a vicious quarrel with Eva's father on the matter of Eva's surgery after the accident in skiing tournament. Eva and Sando migrate to Australia and settle in Sawyer. Eva, a dominating and uncanny wife, becomes bitter after many surgeries. She becomes angry on small matters. The husband and wife quarrel and argue most of the time on trivial matters. They neglect each other and live their secret life. Sando, in his surfing tours, becomes involved in drug trafficking. Eva, in Sando's absence from home, becomes involved sexually in Pikelet. Thus, they behave in deviant manner and, so, they can be called as misfits.

Thus, in conclusion it can be said that the four central characters in Winton's novel *Breath* are misfits in the extreme. The minor characters such as Margaret Myres and Mr. Loon, Loonie's father, are misfits. Mr. Loon provides a role-model of unfettered despair and neglects every aspect of positive fatherhood. These characters lead isolated, deviant and shabby lives. They remain frustrated all through their respective life. They seem to be desperate and utterly

confused over the things they pursue in their lives. They fail to achieve a more balanced life. They can be called as misfits because evidently such people do not make good citizen or family men or women.

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