



# Anita Heiss' *Tiddas* – A Story of True Friendship and Sisterhood: A Critical Study

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**Abstract**— *Dr Anita Heiss' Tiddas (2014) is one of the best chick lit novels ever written by any Aboriginal writer in Australia. The very name "tiddas" is an Aboriginal term which is used specially by the Northern Australians. So it is a general term used among the Aboriginal people which meant sisters or exceptional women in life. As a grammatical particle the word "tiddas" is the plural form of "tidda". In most of the novels, written by Dr Anita Heiss, women are the major protagonists. In Avoiding Mr Right (2006) Alice Aigner is the main protagonist who represents the whole Aboriginal society and the condition of the Aboriginal women in the White centric culture. In Not Meeting Mr Right (2007) she confirms that because of the contemporary cultural miserliness and social degradation the Aboriginal women were absolutely exploited. Even they were unable to choose a Mr Right as their permanent life partner in their real life situation. Even the novel Tiddas acclaimed a huge popularity which the author herself admitted in the Author Note of the novel that she was extraordinarily energized about the edition of Tiddas which corresponds with the premiere of the stage adaptation of the novel. Even she herself admits that I've still got lots of friends there and family. I've never had a bad time in Canberra, I love it there. It even featured in one of my books, Manhattan Dreaming." However, as far as the name of the novel Tiddas (2024) is concerned it absolutely a story of true friendship and sisterhood. It is the most enjoyable and human story dealing with historical and contemporary Aboriginal issues.*



**Keywords**— *Tiddas, Aboriginal, Friendship, Cultural miserliness, Exceptional woman.*

## INTRODUCTION

The novel *Tiddas* (2014) is a story of five women who are sisters, best friends, and very close to each other. They share their experiences and complications of personal lives they face in their real life situation in the state of Australia. These five women may be treated as the best friends of the decade, meet and talk to each other once in a month to discuss the recent books, loves, sex, dates, pregnancy, their marital life, even their menstruation, their personal lives with their husbands and boyfriends, experiences in their job area and including many other private and personal issues freely and frankly.

The novel *Tiddas* is basically female centric like her previous novels – *Avoiding Mr Right* and *Not Meeting Mr Right*. It centers on five women – three Wiradyuri women and two non-Indigenous women. The three Wiradyuri

women are Izzy, Xanthe, and Ellen and the two non indigenous women are Veronica and Nadine. But in spite of their apparent racial differences they have been best friends for decades after going to school together in central New South Wales in Australia. These five sisters cum friends shift to Brisbane over the course of their twenties, and congregate monthly to discuss books, relationships and other aspects of their lives. Actually they are not shy at all in discussing anything in their lives. They are such close and free and frank that they discuss the multidimensional aspects of their lives which focus on the context of cultural identity and their indigenousness and many other contemporary political and historical issues. Interestingly, women have often been treated simply as someone else's wife or mother. But the indigenous women are ready to establish themselves as self sufficient and independent.

Therefore, they have left their home to create their own identity apart from the cultural wretchedness established in the male dominated White society in Australia. Thus the authoress Anita Heiss rightly does comment on the novel:

“I use the book club as a setting to look at particular themes and issues around identity, fertility, infidelity, and relationships between husbands and wives and brothers and sisters,” says Heiss. “There are also references to Black Lives Matter, and Aboriginal identity in terms of how we define ourselves as First Nations peoples.”

So the authoress Anita Heiss AM has very clearly mentioned the purpose of her writing the novel, *Tiddas* (2014). The depiction of Indigenous communities particularly the Koori community in the wider society in written form may be considered as the major elements of the fiction. Heiss's *Tiddas* is full of indigenous and Aboriginal elements. But before going to describe those elements it should be mentioned the major incidents and plots of the novel. The protagonists of the novel are Izzy, Xanthe, Ellen, Nadine and Veronica. They all were at a high school in Mudgee in Australia. Among all other protagonists Izzy was the first Black woman having her own television shows. In the novel *Tiddas* the narrator had described her as:

... the first blackfella to host a mainstream talk show on free-to-air television. She was going to be Australia's Oprah. She held her dream carefully in her hands, and her nightmare unwillingly in her belly.

She did slowly into the red leather bucket chair she'd bought herself when she lnded the Brisbane-based contract to host the news channel for Queensland Arts and Culture. Her stories specifically focused on Brisbane's cultural precinct and events, and artists associated with the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, the state Library, the Queensland Museum and the nearby art galleries. The show was broadcast on Art's Queensland own online station. It was a valuable stepping stone for Izzy and she loved it. So proud of her achievement in simply landing the job, she ordered the chair and had it shipped from the US as a gift to herself. It was where she sat to read scripts, her research notes, the newspaper and books

for her book club. She'd been known to nap in the chair too (P 3)

She had signed a contract that she would like to work as professional. She had wanted to start her own show, her own brand having her own audience. She always maintained a good relationship with the rest of the tiddas. She loved her tiddas very much and respected them also. Actually they were her closest friends. It is absolutely true that they were her actual sisters in the Aboriginal sense of the term. But in real life situation all of them were not Black. Nadine and Veronica were White as far as their class is concerned. The rapport among them was very sound and healthy:

She had supported them, and vice versa, since school, and theirs was a bond stronger than words could define. And yet today Izzy wanted to move the sisterhood boundary a little because she knew Nadine would be urging her to drink so she wasn't the only lush, would unknowingly be making her feel guilty about having the 'luck' she didn't, Ellen would be complaining about the lack of eligible men in Brisbane and Veronica would be talking about her three perfect sons. Izzy didn't want to talk about children or men *at all*. And she was fairly sure she wasn't supposed to drink either. She just wanted to be alone. She wasn't ready to talk to the girls about it yet. That would only make 'it' more *real* (P 7).

Again, she loved the Aboriginal people particularly the Koori community as well as Torres Strait Islanders very much. In Chapter nine of *Tiddas* Izzy and Asher, her fiancée “sat at the bar picking at the herbed polenta” (P 180). She was looking at the Hong Kong Phooey cocktail which she ordered. She did not taste it then. This was going on for a while but Izzy had no interest for food and drink. Asher could not understand what had happened with Izzy. Meanwhile Izzy confessed her that she is going to give birth a baby as she was pregnant then. After their long conversation is over Asher jokingly said that their baby would be as clever as Izzy and as calm and funny as him. Now comes the interesting point. The class division within the aboriginal community people becomes clear as it is found among the Indian Dalits. In India there are so many divisions of caste and sub caste among the Dalit people particularly Scheduled Caste and Scheduled tribe people. S G Ghuriye in *Caste and Race in India* (2006) also admitted these divisions in Indian society. Here the question of identity crises arises. Both Izzy and Asher were quarrelling

between them about the identity of the baby that clever, sexy and would be mother Izzy was going to give birth:

Asher: You (Izzy) are a very clever woman. We are clever. We made a Murri baby.

Izzy: Koori baby.

Asher: Go the Maroons.

Izzy: Go the blues.

Asher: Don't be giving our kid an identity crisis before it's even born. (P 188)

So there are always clashes among different sections of the Aboriginal community.

However, "tiddas" means sisterhood in the context of aboriginal phraseology. Other than Izzy there were two female Aboriginal characters. They were Xanthe and Ellen. Xanthe is a married woman who is very desperate for a baby. She liked conjugal life so much that she would not even think of anything even at the expense of her marriage. Both Xanthe and her husband maintained a kind of healthy relationship with each other. To impress her husband she always maintained her physique. In chapter two called 'Addictions, Obsessions and Delayed Confessions' of the novel *Tiddas* the narrator gives a short description about her physique as well as the conjugal life of Xanthe and her husband:

Xanthe's dark green eyes popped thanks to her smoky eye make-up and blood-red lips. It was 7 p.m. on a Tuesday and she sat in a hip-hugging black Thai silk frock waiting for her husband to arrive. Although they'd both promised to keep the date free to celebrate, she was still grateful that neither had cancelled due to work, as often happened, which was why they were celebrating four months late. They were both workaholics, but still very much in love, and they remained committed to adding to other's happiness in life.... Her (Xanthe) perfect white teeth looked bright against her dark skin. The eyes she got from her Greek father, the skin from her Wiradjuri mother. As a child she was her dad's 'Delphorigine Princess' (Pp 25 - 26).

So they were responsible and devoted to each other regarding their social and marital life. In Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (2014), the author challenged the colonial concept that the native people before the arrival of the settler Europeans were only hunter gatherers. But he pointed out that some European and

White men's accounts and data proved that the Australian Aboriginals had love for agriculture and aquaculture and in real life situation they would practice it. So since the beginning of their lives the Aboriginals were devoted to works. Here also in the quoted text one of the sisters Xanthe and her husband were very workaholics and active persons. Thus following the traditions and cultures of their predecessors is one of the indigenous elements. Both Xanthe and her husband were following that tradition which the Australian Aboriginal people had been maintaining approximately for the last fifty thousand years..

Xanthe had fallen in love with Spencer when she first saw him in the month of June. It was simply love at first sight. They also believed that they had extreme cultural differences as 'someone' belonged to upper strata of the society. But in spite of so many hindrances they were very, happy and content in their orbit' which was not only very admirable but also very up to date and well timed. She was such a kind of fiancée that she had never expressed her high brow about her social status. This is clear from the following statement by the narrator herself:

Xanthe hadn't thought much about status before, and certainly not in recent times with her work and ongoing obsession with getting pregnant. But the truth was she had a mortgage worth more than many would see in a lifetime. She only bought organic produce, and she and Spencer ate regularly at the fancy restaurants along La Trobe Terrace. She wasn't embarrassed about her lifestyle, but she didn't like being labeled as 'upper'. Just as she hadn't liked being labeled 'boong' and 'abo' back in Mudgee as she walked to and from school and the kids from the rival public school hurled abuse at her from across the road. It was bad enough she was Koori, they'd say, but she was part-wog too. Xanthe sighed deeply, recalling the pain of a young child who did not understand the racism that was rife in the late 1970s, or the senseless labels that came with it. Labels she now worked hard to explain to her clients were archaic and socially unhelpful. Labels of any kind rarely served a purpose, and she rejected them all. (Pp 34-5)

Still Ellen as an Aboriginal woman had a kind of inferiority complex as far as complexion is concerned. By the time she

reached at the steps of kangaroo Point where the highest population of the Brisbane were living in the flats. Here again she noted down that the most of the people were “pale”. She then realized the actual fact that all her predecessors were dark skinned. So quite naturally her family members will be different from the rest of the tiddas in the text. This is also reflected in the statement of the narrator:

As both her parents were Wiradjuri, Ellen and her siblings were all much darker skinned than the other tiddas, including Xanthe, whose father was a Greek. Hanging out in Kangaroo Point Ellen had realized that she was also darker than many of the locals she passed in nearby streets (P 93).

Now in Ellen’s mind Brisbane is still a very ‘white city in many ways’. She sometimes considered that her lineage was the largest populace in New South Wales in Australia. This concept of lineage created a sense of respect for her own predecessors who belonged to Wiradjuri community. She also preferred living with her own mob because she had an inherent interest for her own people. In fact this desire for living, her love and respect for her community instilled in her a strong and sturdy sense of ‘Aboriginal Identity’. Ellen’s parents had six kids whom they had bred well there. Her mother was a very gorgeous lady. Now Ellen is also beautiful but she is old enough to propose to date. It may be that she did not get the fittest boy for her or the boys did not find her good looking and fit enough to be considered as fiancée. Besides, she was also a Koori lady in Mudgee. The narrator of the novel, *Tiddas* (2014) has rightly does comment:

...Ellen was old enough to date, it was different. The boys didn’t seem as good looking as the women, or maybe it was that they just didn’t appeal to her. Apart from that, she was related to every second Koori in Mudgee. It was simply too small a town for the life she wanted. She missed out so much in her teens helping to raise her siblings, but she knew enough to know she had to get to the city to not miss out on anything in her twenties (P 94).

Ellen had a curious career which was a blessing to her. Even the women in Wiradjuri aboriginal society had no barrier to end up as a ‘funeral celebrant’. Here Ellen had been playing the role of a funeral celebrant. Every Wiradjuri people would attend the Aboriginal funerals of family and friends. Even they would not get the opportunity to make plans to conduct the funerals as deaths were very regular. In the

novel when Ellen’s cousin died she pronounced and delivered a few eulogies for the peace of his cousin’s soul. From then in the area of Mudgee Ellen became well acquainted as ‘eulogy giver’. It was not at all time taking for Ellen to learn what the Black Aboriginal men would perform during funeral ceremonies.

### CONCLUSION

Thus it may be concluded that there might have some differences of opinions in different issues but still they had a deep and intimate friendship among the sisters in the novel *Tiddas*. They all were worried about the present conditions of both the Aboriginal men and women. The sisters were so close and intimate they would share everything with each other including their private lives. Thus they may be considered as the best friends for the decades. The five 40s women were so cultured that they would meet once in a month to discuss about the books which had been published. As best friends they would tell each other everything what they would face in their real life as well as personal life situation. So naturally trustworthy and honesty was the best policy to them. They would respect, love, castigate, joke with each other. In every weekend everything would come disclosed. Thus the novel must be considered as a story of “generous, witty, a paean to BrizVegas, friendship, and sophisticated urban Aboriginal life”.

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