# SEWING IDENTITIES: ROSALIE HAM'S *THE DRESSMAKER*

# COSIENDO IDENTIDADES: *THE DRESSMAKER*

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## Abstract

This article analyses Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker* (2000) through performativity, postmemory and postcolonialism. The main character, Tilly Dunnage, returns to the fictional town of Dungatar in rural 1950s Australia to confront a traumatic past and take care of her mother. In doing so, she uses fashion as a means of shaping her identity, challenging the Australian outback status quo, and voicing her traumatic past. Her *haute couture* creations make the townspeople visible, but they do not mend the deep emotional wounds. Clothing in *The Dressmaker* serves both as material memory and as a theatrical element that reveals the instability of fixed identities. Ultimately, the article underlines that Tilly's destruction of the town represents both the failure of superficial transformation and the radical potential of (un)dressing as a feminist and postcolonial act.

**Keywords:** Australian literature, material culture, performativity, postcolonialism, postmemory.

## Resumen

Este artículo analiza *The Dressmaker* (2000) de Rosalie Ham desde la performatividad, la posmemoria y el poscolonialismo. La protagonista, Tilly Dunnage, regresa al pueblo ficticio de Dungatar, en la Australia rural de los años 50, para enfrentarse a un pasado traumático y cuidar de su madre. En este proceso, emplea la moda como herramienta de construcción identitaria, resistencia y subversión. Sus diseños de alta costura no solo transforman la apariencia de la comunidad, sino que también dejan al descubierto las heridas emocionales que aún persisten. La moda en *The Dressmaker* funciona como memoria material y

elemento teatral, dejando al descubierto la inestabilidad de las identidades estáticas. El artículo sostiene que la destrucción del pueblo por parte de Tilly simboliza la imposibilidad de una transformación basada en lo superficial y el potencial narrativo de (des)vestirse en el discurso feminista y postcolonial.

**Palabras clave**: cultura material, literatura australiana, performatividad, poscolonialismo, posmemoria.

## 1. Introduction

Rosalie Ham's novel *The Dressmaker* (2000) and its 2015 film adaptation, directed and co-written by Jocelyn Moorhouse, use fashion as a means of storytelling, remembering and identity-shaping. Set in the fictitious rural town of Dungatar, Australia, during the 1950s, the novel centres on Tilly Dunnage, a gifted seamstress who returns home after years of exile. Tilly left Dungatar due to a traumatic incident in her childhood, which led her to live and work in Melbourne, London, Spain, Milan and Paris, places where she developed her skills in *haute couture*.



The trauma that prompted Tilly's exile looms over her return to the town. As a child, she was cornered and assaulted at school by Stewart Pettyman, a local boy, who happened to be, as she will later discover, her stepbrother. In panic, Tilly dodges the boy as he runs towards her, prompting a fatal collision with a brick wall: "'He was running at me like a bull…' she said in a high-whistle voice and put her fingers either side of her ears to make horns', …like this" (Ham 2015: 193). The event, though accidental, marked her as a "murderess" (46) in the town's eyes, since Stewart broke his neck and died, and with his death she had to carry the burden of guilt: "it's guilt, and the evil inside me —I carry it around with me, in me, all the time. It's like a black thing —a weight…" (184).

Tilly's return three decades later disrupts Dungatar's social life. By using fashion, she transforms the appearances of the townspeople but also manages to expose their hypocrisies and secrets. Tilly's designs are admired by the villagers and also make visual, as if we readers were on a catwalk, her emotional journey, particularly her reconciliation with her mother, Molly, and the town's gradual coming to terms with its own moral failures.

Mother and daughter mend their bond, notably so when Tilly speaks of her suppressed grief over the death of her seven-month-old baby, Pablo. It is then when Molly underlines how she, metaphorically, lost Tilly, her baby, too: "'I lost my little girl'" (231). The renewed relationship between the two characters exemplifies Andrea Llano Busta's views on trauma. According to the author, "overcoming trauma is reliant on the private sphere and the ability of family members to

disregard the dominant ideology and show affection which, if verbal, may even counter official narratives" (2019: 47). In a similar vein, Molly confesses that Tilly is the daughter of Evan Pettyman and Tilly admits that she was abandoned by her partner following the death of their baby Pablo, since the father blamed her for the tragedy. This confession allows Tilly to let go of her guilt and to accept the compassion offered by those who truly care for her: the town's outcasts.

Mad Molly, murderess Tilly and eccentric Sergeant Horatio Farrat embody this sense of marginality and use clothing, whether by making or wearing it, to express their Otherness. One of the most revealing moments comes when Sergeant Horatio Farrat, dressed in a frock and leaning on Tilly, confesses, "'I don't care, Tilly', he said, 'I'm beyond caring what those people think or say anymore'" (Ham 2015: 241). Farrat's comment clearly establishes the dichotomy between the outcasts and the townspeople. Even Marigold Pettyman, Stewart's mother, finally acknowledges the truth behind the incident that led to Tilly's exile. Confronting her husband, she claims, "'You mean Tilly, your daughter, murdered *your son*?'" (258, emphasis in original) before exposing Stewart's abusive behaviour: "'Your son the bully. The fat, freckled, rude and smelly little boy who elbowed me when he passed, spied on me in the shower and assaulted little girls'" (258).



Fashion in *The Dressmaker* plays more than an aesthetic role, functioning as a language of its own. The garments Tilly creates are stitched with threads of shame (like Molly's), colonial memory (that which haunts the Australian outback) and unspoken desire (that of being free within a liminal space yet to be written and inhabited). Tilly's designs become acts of resistance, confession, healing and, ultimately, hope. In this context, clothing is not only something you wear, but a medium through which trauma and identity are both unveiled and transformed. I argue that *The Dressmaker* presents clothing as material memory, a means through which trauma can be voiced and redeemed. At the same time, Ham's use of theatre, embodied through costumes and masquerades, deconstructs notions of gender and belonging. Through the symbolic and performative uses of clothing, the novel illustrates how literature and fashion intertwine to disrupt postcolonial and patriarchal structures in mid-century Australia. Ham underlines the tensions between modernisation and traditionalism: the former embodied by Tilly, the latter by Dungatar's outback. Tilly's creative self-expression exposes and challenges Dungatar's moral repression. Fabric, both literally and metaphorically, becomes the means needed for resistance and transformation. Thus, the novel interrogates systems of political power and becomes part of postcolonial literature where aesthetics, memory and identity are stitched together as if the novel were an Australian quilt. Drawing on Judith Butler's work on performativity, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and Frantz Fanon's reflections on clothing and

colonial identity, this article explores how fashion in *The Dressmaker* functions as a material and theatrical language through which trauma, marginality and power are negotiated in mid-twentieth-century Australia.

## 2. Fashion as a Narrative Tool to Heal Trauma

Tilly Dunnage's story is stitched together through garments that reflect her transformation and inner trauma. Cast out as a child, she returns to Dungatar as a highly skilled and internationally trained dressmaker. The novel opens with Tilly arriving at Dungatar's train station. Her intention is to find refuge, to care for her sick mother, known as Mad Molly, and to confront the scars of her own unresolved trauma. Her creations, designs inspired by Balenciaga and Dior, contrast with the outdated and conservative clothing worn in rural Dungatar, which mirrors Dungatar's social norms and prejudices. This tension is shown in the following passage:

> Couples stood aside and stared at Tilly, draped in a striking green gown that was sculpted, crafted about her svelte frame. It curved her hips, stretched over her breasts and clung to her thighs. As the material —georgette, two-and-six a yard from the sale stand at Pratts. The girls in their short frocks with pinched waists, their hair stiff in neat circles, opened their pink lips wide and tugged self-consciously at their frothy skirts. (88)



Tilly's green gown and body merge as if to reveal that she has nothing to hide. In contrast, the people of Dungatar wear outdated frocks that veil not only their bodies but also the social identities they are incapable of performing.

The novel is structured into four parts named after the following fabrics: gingham, shantung, felt and brocade. Each one metaphorically reflects a narrative phase. Gingham, a chequered cotton used for testing patterns, symbolises the instability surrounding Tilly's return and the community's discomfort with her presence: "Beula stamped her feet. '…AND, that daughter of Mad Molly's is back —the murderess!'" (46). It also reflects how much of her identity, her bond with her mother and her role in the town remain fluid and undefined. When her neighbour, Irma Almanac, asks her why she came back, Tilly does not provide a solid answer but an ambiguous one: "'Tell me, why did a beautiful and clever girl like you come back here?' 'Why not?'" (78). This ambivalence is also seen when she explains to Teddy McSwiney, with whom she fell in love, "'They'll just have to get used to you'" (91) to which Tilly answers, "'No,' she said, 'I'll have to get used to them'" (91).

The second part of the novel is entitled "Shantung", after the luxurious silk often used for bridal gowns. This part of the narration coincides with Tilly's first public success and symbolises the fragile acceptance she begins to experience: "Their mouths

dropped and their eyebrows rose as they pointed and whispered, *Think she's royalty*" (106 , emphasis in original), or like when "Gertrude Pratt came forward and stepped between Tilly and Barney" and asked, "'Did you make that dress?' […] Tilly turned to look at her and said cautiously, 'Yes. I'm a dressmaker'" (107). This being the reason why "[A] week before Christmas Tilly sat hunched over her sewing machine at the kitchen table, happy to be creating again" (113). The two fabrics clearly represent the pattern of trade routes that mirror Tilly's own journey and return.

The third part of *The Dressmaker* is entitled "Felt", which refers to a "nonwoven fabric made from short wool fibres" (189), traditionally used for skirts, bonnets and gloves. Felt is different from other fabrics because it is not made by weaving threads. Instead, it is made by pressing wool fibres together until they stick and form a thick, solid cloth, making it a versatile and useful material. Like felt, the events in this segment of the story are carefully chosen: memories, identities and social roles start to shift and change. We learn about Stewart Pettyman's death and the revelation that Tilly is Mr Pettyman's daughter. This is very relevant because, unfortunately, after Teddy's tragic death —caused by his fall into a silo— the townspeople of Dungatar turn against Tilly once more: "'She made him jump'. 'She murdered him'. 'She is cursed'. 'She gets it from her mother'" (201). Their accusations revive old prejudices, such as the townspeople's claim that Tilly killed Stewart Pettyman, and reinforce her outcast status. Soon after, a new seamstress, Una Pleasance, arrives in Dungatar to replace Tilly, relegating her once again to Otherness. This shift highlights the town's refusal to change and the impossibility of a new beginning for Tilly. Sergeant Farrat tries to cheer Tilly up by inviting her to take part in the fundraising festival organised by The Social Club. He asks her to alter his matador's costume, which symbolises Tilly herself, who as a child stepped aside from Stewart Pettyman, the "bull": "'I thought perhaps you could improvise some inserts, similar or at least blending with the general glitter of the costume. They could be disguised quite cleverly by Dungatar's only real creative hands, don't you think?'" (208). His gesture enhances Tilly's strength and transformative resilience to exist on her own terms.



A key moment in this part of the novel is the emergence of the idea of "a DRAMA eisteddfod" (227), a community performance awarding trophies for best actor, best actress, best play and best costumes. It is also in this fragment that Tilly, after finally reconciling with her mother, witnesses her death —a moment that symbolises the end of Tilly's ties to the past as if it were the end of an act, in this case, Act III. Tilly, when referring to theatre, underlines how "[P]lays are such fun to put on. They bring out the best and worst in people" (219). The third part of the novel thus becomes the final act of the life Tilly was forced to perform. Freed from the burden of guilt and memory, the reader is led into the final section of the novel, entitled Brocade, where

the play, both literally and symbolically, takes place. Brocade, a fabric known for its ornate and theatrical qualities, marks the narrative climax, where identity, memory and revenge are draped in layers of symbolism and tragedy through the staging of the play, which I will discuss below. Both felt and brocade emerge as fabrics that symbolise Tilly's empowerment and her readiness for a new start.

The structural union between textile and text reinforces Ham's central message: narrative and identity do not follow a linear path; rather, they are intricately interwoven and mutually constitutive. The novel invites readers to interpret garments as stories made of fabric and shaped by memory, tension and contradiction. Aanchal Malhotra argues that fabrics become "material memory" (2017: 32) and can be as revealing as verbal history, since objects carry the imprint of lived experience. Every stitch Tilly sews carries layers of her own story and the story of Dungatar, as if she were a textile chronicler. Her designs become tools that hearken back to her past, reworking the identities and stories imposed on her. This reworking becomes a refashioning of history where both herstory (Tilly's) and theirstory (Dungatar's) intermingle.



Sergeant Farrat, Dungatar's cross-dressing policeman, also offers a parallel narrative. He secretly buys gingham to make himself a skirt —his queerness hidden in his love for fabric to which only Tilly and the reader bear witness. Sergeant coexists with Tilly in a space of Otherness that he can inhabit through fabric. In his hands, clothing becomes repression and revelation. His work as a maker of clothes is simultaneously underground and an outward tool of resistance against the town's rigid norms. Farrat's secret sewing mirrors Tilly's public designs, both revealing the hope for alternative identities to be sewn. Ham uses Farrat's and Tilly's duality to explore how memory, and particularly traumatic memory, is both hidden and inscribed on the body. Moreover, clothing acts as a mnemonic device for both characters and readers. A dress is never just a dress but a piece of clothing which contains loss, hope, tradition and transformation. For Tilly, who was exiled, abandoned and misjudged, each garment becomes a form of agency: a way to reclaim control. Her designs allow her to be part of the town's discourse and to claim her agency; she speaks through pleats, hems, linings and silhouettes. Fabric, in this sense, does not merely cover bodies —it reveals and transforms them. Fashion goes beyond absence and presence and offers a liminal space where affirmative interpretations can take hold.

## 3. Empowerment and Subversion Through Dress

Fashion empowers characters in *The Dressmaker* by disrupting the status quo. Gertrude, initially mocked as a "good mule" (15), turns radiant in a dress made by

Tilly. Her transformation earns her admiration and even shifts her social position, which means that Tilly's creations do more than beautify —they transform. The newly glamorous women of Dungatar become both admired and envied:

> The ladies from Winyerp and Itheca remained in their seats hiding their frothy frocks and net shawls. When Nancy visited the ladies' powder room, a woman in a stiff, strapless bird's-eye gown stood beside her at the mirror and asked, 'Who makes your enchanting gowns?' (181)

At the same time, Tilly's designs become tools of satire, exaggerating the characters' hypocrisies. When asked about the ball, Tilly exclaims, "'The gowns were wonderful'. She told herself she couldn't expect anything from this town. 'It was a wedding'" (122). Thus, clothing becomes a mirror that reflects the truth behind the social masks that each character wears. Tilly's designs are not just aesthetic decorations but means of narrative control, since through clothing she forces the townspeople to confront their own desires, ambitions and prejudices. Gertrude's bridal transformation, for example, is more than a stylistic triumph; it is a symbolic subversion of Dungatar's social hierarchies. Once ridiculed —"'You can't marry her, she's a heifer'" (109)— Gertrude becomes the object of the community's admiration:



> She looked lovely. Her dark chestnut locks were swept up in poised wave and held secure with a row of luscious pink roses, her eyes sparkling, velvet brown. Her neck looked slender and her skin peachy. She stood there in a fine silk taffeta gown, apricot pink, scoop necked —not too scooped— with sheer off-white tulle three-quarter-length sleeves. The bodice was wrapped firmly about her waist and gathered snugly around her hips, culminating in a large soft bow below her bottom, before falling to swing elegantly. (118)

Likewise, Prudence Dimm, the austere schoolteacher, is transformed into a figure of romantic charm, yet this change strengthens the deep repression and frustration that lie beneath her façade: "For Miss Prudence Dimm, Tilly had tailored royal blue wool crepe close to her body and inserted a sky blue silk double pleat down one side which kicked and shimmered when she moved" (179). Dungatar becomes a fashion show with the arrival of Tilly, proving that she sparks a change in the town's social dynamics. For example, Tilly dresses Ruth in a long-sleeve black top "with light beading that started at her nipples and accumulated at her waist" (179) to soften the effect of her sun-baked shoulders, while Purl, who wanted to look like Marilyn Monroe, wears a "frothy ice-green tulle skirt curled seductively from her tiny waist to hang in jagged handkerchief triangles about her beaded ankle straps and spike heels" (180). These are instances of how fashion is a narrative tool to reveal tensions, desires and contradictions within the community and how the arrival of Tilly adds a new layer to it.

Sergeant Farrat, on the other hand, uses fashion as a private and clandestine performative practice through which he negotiates desire, grief and non-normative forms of self-representation. After the death of Teddy McSwiney, Tilly's lover, he knocks at Tilly's door wearing "gaucho pants, a white Russian Cossack shirt and red quilted waistcoat with a black hat with flat brim balanced at a scandalous tilt on the side of his head" (208). This extravagant outfit stages what can be read as abjectness, that is, a performative surplus that transgresses the town's norms and therefore risks rejection. While Farrat's public identity is performed through the authority of the police uniform, his gingham skirts and Cossack shirt operate as a counter-performance that can only be sustained in secrecy. In Butlerian terms, Farrat's gendered self is brought into being through embodied acts of dressing whose meaning emerges in relation to social norms and spaces of surveillance. Clothing, in this sense, functions as a performative practice that enables and constrains what can be lived, seen and sustained as gender.

It is only at the end of the novel, when Farrat no longer cares what people think, that he attends Molly's funeral wearing a "black knee-length wool-crepe frock with a draped neck, a stylish lampshade overskirt cut asymmetrically, black stockings and sensible black pumps with a discreet leather flower stitched to the heel" (241). Tilly, a seamstress with a Singer sewing machine, becomes crucial here, as she gives him the strength needed to voice his fashion choices. This illustrates how clothing, as Judith Butler (1990) argues, is performative: it constitutes identity and does not just express it. Clothing, as gender, "is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1999: 179). Farrat's internal conflict becomes an emblem of the town's tension between public performance and private truth.[1] His alliance with Tilly, as already noted, allows him to bring that hidden inner self to the surface, unsettling the rigid gender binaries imposed by Dungatar's dominant discourse.



Tilly is also a performer. She plays the part of the glamorous outsider —the European-trained seamstress— but beneath that persona is a woman marked by the trauma of exile and abandonment. Her designs reflect elegance and become acts of defiance. By dressing her enemies, Dungatar's townspeople, she gains control. They are actors within her play of revenge. As she measures and sews, she also gains the agency that she was once deprived by them. Fashion becomes her own weapon and Ham's narrative tool.

Yet, this empowerment through fashion is fleeting. Tilly's designs, once fabrics that differed, begin to homogenise Dungatar. The women become caricatures who hide again behind different, yet ordinary, masks. The masks imprison rather than liberate. In Bakhtinian terms, the masquerade fails to produce dialogic renewal and instead of subverting Dungatar's fixed identities, they reinforce the very social

hierarchies they once seemed ready to overturn (1984: 270). What begins as a carnivalesque moment, both at the ball and at the play, becomes a well-known spectacle where transformation remains only at the surface. Tilly's designs, which were at first transformative tools, become again oppressive structures. This irony shows the fragile limits of aesthetic empowerment and what seems the impossibility of change. The townspeople dress themselves in Tilly's talent to perform new selves, but beneath the textiles, their cruelty remains untouched. In the end, fashion proves powerless to redeem an outdated community who cannot see its own decay. Thus, while fashion offers moments of empowerment, it also serves to expose the limits of individual and collective transformation within systems of repression. Ham suggests that true change requires more than surface alteration, as it demands systemic transformation and moral awareness. Fashion is a narrative tool to make a call for such awareness.

## 4. Theatricality and Performativity



Ham uses theatre as a metafictional intermezzo. There is a play within the novel that takes place in the last part. While the townspeople perform *Macbeth* while wearing the traditional Elizabethan costumes made by Tilly, which exaggerate their grotesqueness, Tilly sets fire to Dungatar. In Dungatar, since Tilly's return —and even before, as is the case of Sergeant Farrat— clothing is always a performance, from wedding gowns to matador capes. Every garment Tilly creates becomes a prop for the community to hide its past and reinvent itself. The choice of play, *Macbeth,* is deeply symbolic since Shakespeare's tragedy explores themes common to Dungatar, that is, ambition, guilt and the dynamics of power. Just as Lady Macbeth uses garments and appearances to hide her feelings of guilt and manipulate others, the townspeople of Dungatar dress in Tilly's designs to erase their past errors and change their social status for the better. The costumes for the performance —opulent and exaggerated, baroque— reflect a collective attempt to rewrite identities and gain control over their public image:

> The pictures showed men costumed in skirts with layers and layers of petticoats and yards and yards of lace dripping from arms covered in voluminous cuffed ruffles and frills. They posed on the page in stockings, below-knee pantaloons with godet bell-bottoms or deep flounces above high-heeled Cromwell slippers tied with large satin bows. Their hats were oversized and heavily plumed. The women wore three-tiered full skirts with ruffled bustles, elaborate multi-storied architect-designed fontanges, feather muffs and jackets with complicated jabots or frilled revers. (249-250)

Tilly does make them, although they are not her designs, but the ones from *The Complete Work of Shakespeare and Costumes Throughout the Ages*. Nevertheless, Tilly

gave them her particular touch. For the community, the costumes were "perfect" (278), but for Tilly they were the ironic burden she was forced to wear in her youth. That is, they are heavy garments which represent murder and ambition: "Trudy circled them, her seventeenth-century baroque cast of the evil sixteenth-century Shakespeare play about murder and ambition" (278). The committee members of Dungatar Social Club read *The Complete Work of Shakespeare and Costumes*, but not the play itself. Some of them, like Muriel, do not even know who Shakespeare was: "'You've heard of him haven't you?' 'She may not have', said Mona. 'I hadn't until last week'" (250). On the other hand, Tilly can quote Act IV, Scene I by heart. This example highlights the dichotomy between Dungatar's community and Tilly, although, at this point, Tilly becomes powerful in comparison to the others. The first three parts of the novel, like the play, are an illusion, presenting Tilly's attempt to change and reconcile with Dungatar and its people as impossible, but this last part projects hope.

The play itself becomes not the final act, but the interlude to the final act, that is, the end of the novel. The rehearsal is pure chaos, showing the community's true self: "We've all got summer flu, sore throats and blocked sinus, no one's seen Elsbeth, everyone hates Trudy —I'd be a better director than her, at least I've *been* to the theatre" (279 , emphasis in original). Tilly sews her revenge, while Trudy, lacking a language of her own like Tilly's, gives voice to what she truly desires for the community, disregarding the social conventions imposed on her: "'I hope you develop dysentery and I hope you all get the pox and die of dehydration because enormous scabs all over your body ooze so much. I hope all your dicks turn shiny-black and rot off and I hope all you women melt inside and smell like a hot rotted fishing boat, I hope you —'" (280). Trudy's husband, William, slaps her face and warns her that if she makes a sound that night "we'll tie you to this chair with fishing line, fetch him and all swear on Bibles that you're mad" (281). Trudy was part of the community calling Molly "Mad Molly" and now the tide has turned.



On the other hand, if in the rehearsal we see this gendered power relation, it is inverted when Tilly visits Marigold Pettyman. Evan Pettyman was poisoning Marigold, making her sick and fragile. Tilly cures her by giving her marigold water. That is, Tilly gave Marigold her own strength back to confront Evan Pettyman, the man who took all her money, cheated on her and sent Tilly away. Marigold's performance in her own household mimics a character in *Macbeth*'s play: "He caught a flash of light as she reached behind his ankles and slid the razor-sharp carving knife across his calcanean tendons" (258). Evan Pettyman dies, and Marigold is free. However, the performance at Winyerp is not as successful. Although they receive the award for best costume, their poor performance after

Act I prompts the audience —"cast members' husbands and wives, mothers and children from Winyerp, Itheca and Dungatar" (292)— to leave, so that only the four judges remain. This emptiness seems to anticipate what they will encounter upon their return to Dungatar: "the entire town had been razed" (294).

The staging of *Macbeth* and the novel's ending position the community in an act of collective performativity. Butler underlines how identity is constituted through repeated social performances and, in this sense, both the play and the novel become a mirror for Dungatar. At the same time, Butler's emphasis on repetition allows readers to see how collective performance may consolidate normative identities, as the townspeople's theatrical masquerade reproduces the very gendered and social scripts it appears to expose. Wearing Tilly's costumes in the play — baroque, theatrical and historically inaccurate— reveals how fashion and identity are intertwined in a grotesque performance. They are no longer individuals, but characters and actors in a novel/on stage, acting out a script written by their own repression. The performance, both literally and metaphorically, represents self-exposure, which until then only the outcast characters —Tilly, Mad Molly, Sergeant Farrat, Marigold and Teddy— were able to see. Dungatar's citizens embody roles that were never truly theirs, and by performing them on stage, they parody themselves. Regarding these outcasts, both Mad Molly and Teddy end up dying and Tilly sets fire to Dungatar. For Sergeant Farrat, on the other hand, garments, which he wore in isolation, offer him an escape from the rigid dichotomy. Marjorie Garber underlines how cross-dressing is the "third term" outside binary genders, which resonates in Sergeant Farrat's wardrobe (in Bruzzi 1997: 150). His drag, which he can only perform in front of the other outcasts, challenges Dungatar's hegemonic masculinity. Tilly, too, performs multiple selves: the Parisian couturier or the dutiful daughter, for example. We could say then that fashion becomes a stage prop through which identity is recast repeatedly. Costumes offer the needed fluidity which defies certainty and possibility, and which does not offer a conclusion. Tilly's identity, like Farrat's, defies imposed categorisation and mirrors the performative instability of the self and the volatility of Dungatar.



Dungatar's spectacle recalls *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott 1994), where drag queens free themselves and parody societal norms in Australia. But unlike *Priscilla*, spectacle in *The Dressmaker* leads to downfall. Tilly burns her designs and the entire town to rid the space of its inherited violence. The performativity of fashion here reaches its climax: garments, once used to cover up, are sacrificed in the name of unveiling the truth. Before splashing the kerosene with which she sets fire to the house, she recites, "The night is long that never finds the day" (287), echoing Malcolm in *Macbeth*. It is thanks to the metafiction

that we understand that the reign of Macbeth, here pointing to Dungatar, will end and give way to a new beginning. This dramatic conclusion proves that theatricality itself can be both a mask and a method of revelation. The curtain falls, the novel ends and what remains are the ashes of truth revealed and hope for a fresh start, free from systemic impositions.

## 5. Postmemory and Trauma

Tilly's trauma is what Marianne Hirsch (2012) calls "postmemory", that is, the intergenerational transmission of traumatic experience. Tilly embodies the unspoken shame of her mother, Molly, and her biological father, Evan Pettyman, which becomes her own curse. This trauma is not only personal but also political, since it is rooted in gendered violence and class injustice, as we have seen in the present article. Andrea Llano Busta claims that "The coexistence of these [historical] events with chiefly personal afflictions […] transmutes their presence in the novel from a mere chronology to a chronicity of trauma" (2025: 178). Her exile from Dungatar is a punishment for a crime she did not commit and a symbolic erasure of both her mother's and her own agency. Both Tilly and Molly become passive characters without a voice of their own. Molly was trapped in the moniker "Mad Molly", not allowed by the community to shed the role. Tilly, on the other hand, separated from the community, regains her agency and, thanks to her sewing machine, denounces those responsible for her trauma.



Unfortunately, not seeing the possibility of change and, with it, feeling the lack of hope, she destroys the town and leaves Dungatar, although this time it is a choice and not an imposition. It is symbolic how, despite having burnt her designs, she waits for the train sitting on top of her Singer sewing machine: "Tilly Dunnage sat on her portable Singer sewing machine on the platform at the railway station watching grey steam clouds chuffing towards her from the golden horizon" (289). It is also symbolic that only Tilly Dunnage's chimney remains: "Nothing remained, except Tilly Dunnage's chimney" (295). Tilly left Dungatar first as a passive and submissive character, then returned active to become passive again, and she leaves the town as an active character. Only the chimney stands in Dungatar as if it were an extinct dominant discourse uttering its last words, soon to be replaced by a new, plural one.

We can affirm then that clothing functions as a visual language through which trauma can be transmitted and transformed. As Llano Busta underlines, "Gaining a full understanding becomes a daunting task caused by the paradox between verbalizing traumatic events as a way to overcome them […] while considering

that doing so may be regarded as a betrayal of the past. In the absence of language, sensory perceptions bear considerable relevance as they partially convey that reality still incomprehensible" (2019: 50). When the townspeople wear Tilly's designs, they momentarily inhabit her vision, but they also exploit it, using fashion to mask their own purpose, or so they think. Her garments become a double-edged sword, offering beauty while revealing their obscure side beneath the surface. Clothing thus serves as a stage for confrontation and a site for (post)memory. Tilly resurfaces the hidden truths of the town, stitching different meanings into the community's old wounds. Llano Busta adds that "[C]ommunities of memory can only exist as long as their members are not impervious to recollections beyond their own nor untouched by the traumas of others" (2025: 177).

In this way, Tilly's fashion acts as postmemory: clothing carries not only Tilly's story, but also, as we have addressed, Dungatar's repressed side. It becomes a signifier: "[t]he way people clothe themselves, together with the traditions of dress and finery that custom implies, constitutes the most distinctive form of a society's uniqueness, that is to say the one that is the most immediately perceptible" (Fanon 2004: 43). For Fanon, clothing functions as a mechanism through which colonial power is internalised, disciplining bodies through mimicry and repetition; fashion, thus, becomes a space of alienation. The town shows a colonial identity through clothing which is an outdated and imposed European fashion: "They were standing about in pairs and bunches, leaning together, glancing down at their own frocks — pale spun rayon prints, shoulder pads, swathed waists, prominent bust lines, high prim collars, three-quarter sleeves, tweed suits, gloves and dumpy, eye-veiling head-hugging hats" (Ham 2015: 107).[2] Tilly's designs, also influenced by European standards, although fresh and not subsumed in the colonial past, attempt to celebrate non-normative identities. Each scrap and off-cut are "remnants of a fashion statement" (286) and, for Tilly, reminders of what caused her trauma. Each piece has a meaning:



> Stacked to the roof, shoved into every orifice in the small tumbling house were bags and bags of material bits spewing ribbon ends, frayed threads and fluff. Cloth spilled from dark corners and beneath chairs and clouds of wool lay about, jumbled with satin corners. Striped rags, velvet off-cuts, strips of velour, lamé, checks, spots, paisley and school uniform mixed with feather boas and sequin-spattered cotton, shearer's singlets and bridal lace. Coloured bolts stood propped against window sills and balanced across the armchair. (286)

Ham's meticulous portrayal of fashion as both a weapon and a shield illustrates how trauma is processed. Traumatic events can be so overwhelming that the person who experiences them cannot understand their dimension as trauma occurs. This unresolved material is repressed and stored, manifesting later in life. This is

what Cathy Caruth named "belatedness" (1996: 3-4). The description above is an example of how all these pieces of thread scattered all over the house, which represent the material memory that caused Tilly her trauma, were too much.

Once out of hiding, Tilly is able to move on. Her final act of burning Dungatar is a feminist and postcolonial rejection of the surface and an act of advocacy to change the interior. To do so, Tilly has her sewing machine: "Her sewing machine waited erect on its housing table, an overlocker sitting forlornly at the bottom of the doorless entrance" (Ham 2015: 287). Setting fire to the fabrics is at once an attempt to destroy the trauma by converting thread into ashes and, at the same time, an act of purification. Tilly sitting on top of her sewing machine waiting for the train at the end of the novel leaves open the question of whether healing is possible without destruction. With her Singer machine she can sew another future, and Ham lets the reader imagine what is in store. Tilly is the "Waltzing Matilda" who travels and has a Singer machine as her swagman.

This end makes the reader think about the relationship between trauma, memory and reparation. Tilly's fire serves as a personal catharsis and constitutes her response to postmemory. Ham uses the metaphor of fire to underline loss and freedom and the hope for renewal. In the end, Tilly does rewrite Dungatar, since she leaves the space as a blank page to fill up. Through the language of fashion, she exposes the town's identity, ultimately refusing to mend its inhabitants with superficial stitches. This ending invites us to consider how clothing, like memory, carries the weight of generations, and how sometimes, to move forward, we must first burn the thin fabric that covers us up.



## 6. Conclusion

*The Dressmaker* exposes the political dimensions of clothing. Through Tilly, Ham critiques the Australian postcolonial condition, placing the outback as a repressive example permeated by gender binaries and trauma. Fashion is a metaphor for identity and a means of viewing and deconstructing it. Tilly's designs transform bodies and voice the complex entanglements of memory. Clothing, in this novel, proves to be performative, theatrical and symbolic. By destroying her own creations and the town itself, Tilly plays the final act: "She was wreathed in a brilliant halo, like a back-lit actor, dust from tailor's chalk and floc floating in shafts of light about her" (Ham 2015: 286). Burning Dungatar is an act of rebirth and a call for a future not stitched with the same old patterns. The novel challenges readers to acknowledge the material and symbolic power of clothing as a language in its own right and to reconsider the politics of appearance.

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# Notes

1. In the film adaptation, his closet, full of silks and delicate accessories, serves as a sanctuary, a theatrical refuge from the oppressive demands of social norms

2. By contrast, Tilly's use of hybrid patterns, including, in the film adaptation though not in the novel, indigenous motifs and Australian flora and fauna, introduces alternative ways of being and, with them, new futures.



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