

Patrick White's Voss: A Critical Study

Dr. A. Noble Jebakumar

Assistant Professor

PG and Research Department of English

H. H. The Rajah's College

Pudukkottai 622001

A significant segment of Common Wealth Literature is from Australia. Australian literature has vision, epic magnitude, inward explorations, outward recesses, outward explorations, spontaneous traditions of human mind and spirit. The Australian writer's obsession with land makes its conscious of the minute. Patrick White, Nobel laureate, "uses conventional chronological novel from and chooses to express his mystical vision through the

developing reverberation of his character's progress". His base of operation is basically religious. "He reveals knowledge of mystical and esoteric texts, combining spiritual experience and spiritual vision".

The mystical vision echoes the totally different geography of Australia. Australian land is a burned out desert, inimical to modern man. The few novels of Patrick white, "Voss" (1957) and "Riders in the Chariot" (1961), have religious vision and romantic

setting, with romantic and mystic elements predominating over the narration. These two novels respond to this account with the characters and incidents, mystic and romantic. The coloured or alien immigrant is obsessed with two worlds the first rejects him whereas the second has no fascination for him. Voss though a German, was an alien in white skin. Voss was the great German explorer of Australia possessing the land through death. He is the mystery of the unreal. The sand that sucks his blood is symbolic of loneliness, the emptiness of human soul and the spirit that sustains life.

Voss, the hero, is human in one level, myth in another level, but mystic in a mental and

spiritual level. The realism of the novel is mingled with myth – making elements, and history becomes myth in Patrick Whites’ “Voss”. “Voss” the enterprise is deliberately mystic. Voss lacks ordinary human – virtues – he is socially inept, obsessively self – righteous, believes only the God in himself, speaks his truth, Laura Trevelyan, doubting, perceptive, willing to give way to the whims of her inferiors; but who can also be impeccable in the truthfulness, confronts him.

Patrick White’s “Voss” and “Riders in the Chariot” are novels where human vision stands supreme. This novel exposes four characters with a four – fold variety of experience. The world of a crazy specimen of the decayed

Australian gentry; with experience of the natural world, of plants and animals through Miss Hare's nearly non – human instinct for otherness, the world of an unpretentious working woman, of integral simple goodness in Mrs. God bold, the East Anglian Immigrant, the world of a persecuted German Jew, of the profoundest religious experience in Himmelfarb, the saintly survivor of the Nazi camps and the world of an uprooted aboriginal of art, through the paintings of Alf Dubbo, the tubercular half – caste.

The suffering of these four is by persecution, for, it culminates in death by torture, the ultimate reality of a person gifted with romantic and mystic characteristics .Patrick White's

talent is sad, tense, religions, furious, and powerful, with help from the dazzling vision of man.

Mysticism is a spiritual apprehension of truth beyond the understanding. It refers to the contemplation of Self - Surrender. Voss, who is Christ – like, who has Christ in him, moves towards the magnificent emptiness of the desert, undergoing torture aiming only this mystic union with the Creator,.

Mr.Paul Elmer More defines Romanticism as “the illusion of holding the infinite within the stream of nature itself, instead of apart from that stream,”as an apotheosis of the cosmic flux” The function of the human mind which is to be regarded as peculiarly “romantic”, is for some, ‘the heart

as opposed to the head; for others, “the Imagination, as contrasted with Reason, and the “Sense of Fact”, A psychological antithesis. Romantic temper is that of a mystic, and it consists of those expressions of human nature, which are most spontaneous and unpremeditated. Romantic imagination, as an ideal is brought to a fuller consciousness of their own powers, aiming at fashioning new worlds of the mind.

The characteristic elements of Romanticism or rather the romantic elements, could be as follows, in its brevity:

1. Individualism: To Victor Hugo, this was liberalism in literature where “Form” could be the line of treatment.

2. Imagination: Free play of imagination was primary, and it was freedom from conformity with emphasis on mental, emotional reaction to the subject.

3. Humanitarian Outlook: This was inherent of reason, emotion, and sympathy for fellow man for lower creatures with a melancholy contemplation of life.

4. Nature: Rousseau’s influence could lead to interest in Nature leading to simpler life, for Nature appealed to the condition as being nearer to the mystery of the universe in its discovery than man’s orderly creations.

5. Interest was in the past, exotic, the remote in time and place.

The Romantic finds the image of man in God, alleging to the Christian concept of God, creating, “Man in His Image”. The three– fold concept of Nature – God man, has become Nature – God.

“The Romantic poets obeyed an inner call to explore more fully in the world of the spirit. They endeavoured to explore the mysteries of life and thus understand it better, It was this search for the unseen world that awoke the inspiration of the Romantics and made poets of them .They appealed not to the logical mind but to the complex self, in the whole range of intellectual faculties , senses and emotions”. Patrick White in his novels,” “Voss” and “Riders in the

Chariot”, make a mystic appeal reverberate in the deserts of an intellectual mind.

Patrick White’s novels, especially, his two significant novels, “Voss” and “Riders in the Chariot” treat the exploration romantic and mystic, of the land, and the psyche, simultaneously. They seek to trace the romantic quest of God through Nature. There is the sudden revelation of the search for the absolute, the search for the transcendental in or through human union with God or Nature.

“Riders in the Chariot” is a literary replica of the four cherubin and the four wheels of the Chariot, pertaining to the vision of Ezekiel, in the Old Testament. The four significant characters Mrs. Ruth

Godblod, Mordecai Himmelfarb, Miss Mary Hare and Alf Dubbo, are representative of a divine doom, destiny, and traumatic tragedy. They represent the 4 aspects of the main theme, giving complexity, energy and fill it with romantic and mystic elements. The theme is represented in apocalyptic characteristics, climaxing in a vision, after the manner of Ezekiel and Blake. Sarsaparilla, the Australian town, is the mystic locale, depicting the mystic way of life of Miss Mary Hare an ugly, and elderly spinster of Xanadu, Mordecai Himmelfarb a former professor of English, and a Jewish immigrant, Mrs. Ruth Godblod, a mother a wife, washerwoman of simple heart and Alf Dubbo, an aborigine painter,

on the eve of their isolated lives. The fourth protagonist lives to be witness to the destruction of dilapidated mansion of Xanadu. The narrative presents an extended picture of the early of Mary Hare and Himmelfarb with a diluted version of Alf Dubbo and Ruth Godblod. The plot, the antagonists and the theme becomes complete, when Miss Hare, fleetingly, has the acquaintance of Alf Dubbo and Himmelfarb. The four characters are highly imaginative and mystic, for they are troubled by different expects of love. Three factors, Sex, marital state and New Australian, prepare them for the Visions to follow .The chariot, the four riders, the vision, and move along with the central theme. The four characters are four individuals

with high – strung imagination, bubbling with emotion, reason and intelligence, be they humble as Mrs. Godblod or supremely intellectual as Himmelfarb; Nature has its effect, humanitarian outlook plays its part, and this lives move towards mystic, and romantic fusion.

‘Patrick White’s characters traverse a path of suffering in their humiliation and their self – sacrifice; the path the Christ trod’. They share “a kind of visionary percipience which leads to understanding the truth”.

Mary Hare is one of the loneliest and miserable creatures. Patrick white has created; through in her madness she lives in a state of grace, suffering being the common feature in life, she

undergoes a four–stage development of innocence, experience, death and reconciliation, subscribing to the main theme of dualism of and the conflict between evil and good.

Mordecai Himmelfarb is a Jew, a romantic, an adventurer, a visionary, a mystic, an intellectual genius, a man of love, who longs for love, a suffering Christ in the form of a human, an individualist , a humanitarian and ultimately a man, searching for a deeper, inner meaning in life. He is yet another visionary in White’s “Riders in the Chariot”.

The conflict is between the two sources, the external and the internal, the non–human forms affecting Mary Hare, and the inner way of Himmelfarb -

-- she being a mystic of nature, revels in the romantic element of Nature with its ramifications, and he, being product of Jewish mysticism, analyses it in the inner spiritual way, aligning more on religious mysticism, made possible by a mental discipline. There is no intellectual answer to human suffering, it comes only through surrender, and ending in love and love is God. Christ's suffering is equated with the personal suffering of Himmelfarb and Christ's passion, prior to his death by crucifixion in Gethsemane, has a parallel in Himmelfarb.

Alf Dubbo is the 4th rider. He is the most Blakean figure of the riders. He represents the artist's way to the world of transcendence. He is "a bright boy of mixed race,

who was reared in a small town among black gins, dressed in a cast off clothing, waiting to be picked-up by white youths and old drunks. Miss Hare, despite her affection and attachment to non-human forms, was marked by gentility. Mrs. Godbold, who is simplicity par excellence, had inner tranquillity. Himmelfarb, while climbing from stage to stage, exhibits advanced learning and sanctity. Alf Dubbo, the extreme, shares the vision, showing devotion and this he does through the intense rhythm of painting, showing interest in purity, reality and values. Dubbo's supreme act in life is his effort to paint his vision of the chariot. The belief that physical purity is a consistent requirement for spiritual purity is

believed in Alf Dubbo's case. Being physically impure, he is spiritually able to have the vision, and become a visionary rider. Alf Dubbo is highly individualistic. His capacity for imagination makes him soar higher to the point of seeing the chariot and have an apocalyptic vision. Himmelfarb brings out his humanitarian concern for his fellow humans. Despite his moral depravity, his mind moves to deeper and saner levels in his analysis and realization that finally merges with love and makes him a rare visionary.

The spiritual achievement of these 4 riders, through nature, intelligence, religion and love, unite "this group by their possession of a secret gift,

the immediate apprehension of reality and values by modes of understanding reflected or despised by the common run of men". Mary Hare, Himmelfarb and Alf Dubbo die, and Mrs. Godbold bold lives in her simple way, facing the world's ordeal through her capacity for love. It moves towards the mystic. Each one of the four riders is a visionary. There exists the exploration of the mind, rather the reasoning mind. Each one is an individual, endowed with specific quality of greatness.

Conclusion:

The essence of critical analysis in the "Riders in the Chariot, is the great shaping activity causing the world of substance to quake, There are 4

characters Patrick white presents in this mystic novel. The first, Himmelfarb is a spiritual and religious mystic. The second is Alf Dubbo. His purity of being and singleness of purpose brings him, his mystic vision. He stands parallel to Mary Magdalene of the New Testament. The third is Mrs Godbold. She by her simplicity to devotion and duty becomes a visionary. The Chariot, glorifies itself as the symbol of unity, bringing in suffering through love. A story of manifold voices, it turns a tale of inner fire, causing the world of substance to quake, in the 4 riders, but for the reader himself, suffering is personal. The sincerest laughter, laughter is fraught, with some pain which is emotional and spiritual leading to the suffering of

the soul, which the sufferer alone comprehends. The 4 riders, being visionaries fail in their physical lives, but triumph in their spiritual lives...

Alf Dubbo's death due to a tubercular haemorrhage. Miss Hare's death after the destruction Xanadu, Himmelfarb's death after his crucifixion, in Mrs. Godbold's case – Mrs. Godbold's case – Mrs. Godbold lives for love.

Creation is an art. There is no woman without man. Without women, there is no world. Voss Lives forever.

WORKS CITED

Anniah Gowda, H. H., Ed. **The Colonial And the Neo-Colonial Encounters in Common Wealth Literature**. Mysore; University of

- Mysore, 1983. Print.
- Been J. B. Coleridge, **The Visionary**.
London: Chatto and Windus,
1970. Print.
- Bowra, Maurice. **The Romantic
Imagination**. London: Oxford
University Press, 1969. Print.
- Chellapan, K. **Commonwealth
Literature**. **Indian Express**, 4
April 1984. Print.
- Gray, Martin. **A Dictionary of
Literary Terms**. New York:
Longmans, 1985. Print.
- Ingmar Bjorksten. **Patrick White**.
Australia: University of
Queensland Press, 1976. Print.
- Marcel, Gabriel. **Being and Having**.
London: Oxford University
Press, 1965. Print.
- Merton, Thomas. **Thoughts in
Solitude**. London: Dell Brooke,
1964. Print.
- Smith, Angela. **Note on Voss:
Patrick White**. London York
Press, 1982. Print.
- Spurgeon, C. F. E. **Mysticism in
English Literature**. London:
Cambridge University, 1913.
Print.
- Veronica, Brady. **The Novelist and
the New World: Patrick White's
Voss**. **Texas Studies in Literature
and Language**, 21 (Summer
1979). Print.
- Walsh, William. **Patrick White's
Fiction**. London: Allen and
Unwin, 1977. Print.
- Wilker, G. A. **Australian Literature:
A Conspectus**. Sydney, 1969.
Print.
- White, Patrick. **Voss**. London:
Oxford University Press, 1984.
Print.