

NATURE, MAN AND THE TRAGIC SENSIBILITY IN PATRICK WHITE'S *THE COCKATOOS*

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Abstract

Patrick White, the first and only Australian writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature has to his credit a number of works of long fiction in which he has delved into the various aspects of human relationships. This paper, however, will focus on White's collection of shorter fiction, The Cockatoos where he has dealt with the themes of the interactions of man and nature. The focus will be on three short stories in this collection, "A Woman's Hand", "Five Twenty" and "The Cockatoos" in which the writer has shown the tragic consequences of man's interactions with nature and his fellow human beings in spite of their best intentions.

Patrick White's collection of short stories *The Cockatoos* was published in 1974, a year after he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. It has six short stories, each dealing with different human situations and depicting the characters interacting with each other in the course of living their everyday lives. White has chosen for his characters ordinary people having ordinary joys and sorrows. In these stories, White tries to examine the lives of his country men and women, interpreting their lives in the light of the events taking place in their lives and on the basis of their responses to them. In this paper we will concentrate on three stories- "A Woman's Hand", "Five Twenty" and "The Cockatoos" and see how White deals with the various aspects of Australian life within the comparatively shorter space of the short story.

The first story, titled "A Woman's Hand" opens with the natural description of the Australian landscape, describing its dry and rocky surface and the series of houses : The wind was tearing into the rock-plants, slashing reflections out of the leaves of the mirror-bush, torturing those professional martyrs the native trees. What must originally have appeared an austere landscape, one long rush of rock and scrub towards the sea, was prevented from wearing its natural expression by the parasite houses clinging to it as obstinately as wax on diseased orange branches.(9) This description reminds us of the description of Mr. and Mrs. Thurlow's house in the short story "The Ox" written by the English novelist and short story writer H. E. Bates there also the description of the landscape brings in a feeling of isolation

and desolation: The Thurlows lived on a small hill. As though it were not high enough, the house was raised up, as on invisible stilts, with a wooden flight of steps to the front door. Exposed and isolated, the wind striking at it from all quarters, it seemed to have no part with the surrounding landscape. Empty ploughed lands, in winter-time, stretched away on all sides in wet steel carves. (89)

We are then introduced to the two central characters- Harold and Evelyn Fazackerley who are taking an afternoon walk in the countryside. They are an elderly couple, Harold having just retired. This journey into this unknown part of the Australian landscape leads them on to a surprising re-union-the discovery of an old school friend of Harold's, Clem Dowson who has been living in that area, having constructed a crude wooden house beside a cliff. He seems to be leading a perfectly satisfied existence in that lonely place, watching the ocean, as he himself confesses to Harold. But Evelyn cannot approve of this style of living, as it appears very much "empty" to her, devoid of any type of excitement and social interaction. Also she does not like Clem, as she remembers the previous occasion when they had come across this shy, withdrawn man in Egypt where both Harold and Clem were working.

However, after observing his bare and lonely bachelor's establishment, she is prompted to introduce a woman's touch and, consequently introduces an old acquaintance named Nesta Pine to him. In course of time, Clem and Nesta get married and settle down but tragedy strikes soon when Nesta has a nervous breakdown and Clem is knocked down by a bus and killed. Thus in the end Evelyn's awkward attempt at bringing two people together, though well intentioned, results in disaster and disarray. Thus, White perhaps intended to show through this story the futile efforts of man to change the course of the lives of their friends. After these sad incidents, the Fazackerleys were pushed back to the routine boredom and drabness of their lives and continued to spend their retirement in traveling from one place to another without anything exciting happening to them. Thus, this story may, at one level, be interpreted as one where a woman's too eager attempt and good intention brings disaster in the lives of two persons who had been living perfectly contented lives in their own ways. So, the title of the story 'A Woman's Hand' may also be looked upon as ironical in the sense that the woman referred to here, Mrs. Evelyn Fazackerley, tries to be helpful but unintentionally only succeeds ultimately in bringing about exactly the opposite result.

The next story that we will consider is titled "Five Twenty", the fourth story in this collection. Here again, we meet an elderly couple who are childless, Royal and Ella Natwick, the former an invalid and confined to his wheelchair and the latter a woman whose life is now centred in caring for and humouring her husband. Their main interest now consists in watching the traffic from their front veranda every evening. While observing the traffic, they become conscious of a stranger in a pink and brown car passing their gate each day exactly at five twenty in the evening. They start to speculate about this gentleman – who he is and why he had chosen a car with those unusual colours. They also notice his funny shaped head and comment on it. Gradually, as time passes, it becomes difficult for Royal to sit and watch the traffic with his wife and then she takes it upon herself to inform him about the traffic and whether that gentleman has passed by. Now there occurs a break when he is absent for sometime and then Mrs. Natwick has a dream about this stranger standing on the side path

along the garden. After this sudden break in his passing by their house, the man makes his appearance in a new cream coloured car and after that it becomes a regular habit for Royal to ask his wife if he has passed by their house. But after Royal's death, Mrs. Natwick continues to sit alone on the veranda every evening watching the traffic like she used to do with her husband. Though now Royal is no longer by her side, she has the feeling that he is still sitting beside her, watching the traffic. But, strangely enough, one day she meets this stranger face to face when his car breaks down and he comes to her house to make a phone call. During that short time they are together, they enter into a kind of tacit understanding and a promise on his part that he would return the next day. But the next evening, as it unfortunately turns out, the gentleman is severely injured in an accident and soon after coming to her house, he dies. The story ends with Mrs. Natwick's over-zealous attempts at reviving the stranger who had brought a very brief spell of romance into her otherwise drab existence after her husband's death. Thus, in this story too, fate plays a cruel trick on Mrs. Natwick in creating this new void in her life just at the time she had been perhaps hoping to start a new life. It seems that it is her sense of loneliness and a desire for companionship that leads her to embark on this new adventure. The story is titled "Five Twenty" because each evening at five twenty the stranger passed their house but on the fateful day he died, he did not arrive on time but came much later, only to die soon after. So, White comments that Mrs. Natwick, in spite of her best intentions, succeeds indirectly in causing the stranger's death as it were "by loving too deep". So her desperate attempt to try and break the set pattern in her dull life is thwarted by the turn of circumstances. Thus, like in the previous story, here also the reader can sense an invisible force which is at work which brings about tragic results, turning man's best intentions futile.

The third story under our consideration is titled "The Cockatoos" which is the last one in this collection and which also bears the same name as the collection of these stories. In this story, the two main characters are Mr. and Mrs. Davoren who are a married couple but again childless. At the beginning of the story, we are introduced to Mrs. Davoren. But before long we learn an unusual fact, that she and Mrs. Davoren have not spoken to each other for almost seven years and that communicate with each other through writing. We are told the reason also- Mr. Davoren's negligence which led to the death of Mrs. Davoren's pet boodgie. But at this point in their lives, a new development takes place when suddenly some cockatoos come visiting in their garden. This unexpected occurrence stirs up Mrs. Davoren's old love for birds and she resolves to put out sunflower seeds for them which they love to eat. But a surprise is in store for her when she finds that someone else has already put out the seeds before her for the birds. Her great delight at observing the cockatoos eating is mixed with fear and indignation because she feels that the birds belong to her and that someone is trying to take them away from her :The cockatoos came at evening, the pair, stamping round the dish at the foot of the tree. Clumsy, beautiful creatures! On seeing them, her mouth fell open; their crests flicked like knives threatening intruders; then when the first seeds were cracked, the feathers so gently laid in a yellow wisp along the head. She loved her birds. They *were* hers surely? whoever had put out the seed. They were given to her as compensation.(280)

But while watching the birds, she becomes aware that her husband is equally interested in them and that he too is watching them from the opposite window. But after this initial visit to their garden, the cockatoos suddenly stop coming and both the Davorens are miserable and miss their birds very much. During this time, one day they re-start their conversation, at first prompted by the disappearance of the birds and the possible cause. They feel afraid when they hear rumors that their eccentric neighbour Mr. Figgis may have poisoned them because it is common knowledge that he hates cockatoos. But, to the great joy of the Davorens, one day the cockatoos return in large numbers : And the sky was awash with cockatoos returning, settling on the gumtrees which grew in the garden. If silent, the birds might have merged with the trees, but they sat there ruffling, snapping at twigs, screeching- cajoling, it sounded; one of them almost succeeded in forming a word.(292) After a very long time, Mr. and Mrs. Davoren feel that they are sharing a common interest and thus the long silence in their relationship is broken by this incident of the cockatoos returning to feed. But soon this ideal scene is disturbed as Mr. Figgis appears armed with a shotgun and shoots dead two birds.Mr. Davoren is furious and in the ensuing scuffle with Mr. Figgis, he is accidentally killed. Thus ends the very brief re-union of Mr. and Mrs. Davoren. Soon everything returns to normal with the birds returning slowly and Mr. Figgis being taken away by the police. The story ends with this sad incident, leaving Mrs. Davoren a widow and alone.

Thus, if we look back on these three stories in this collection, it would be clear that White has chosen three elderly Australian couples for his main protagonists whose lives he is depicting and commenting on. These couples are leading peaceful, uneventful lives until one important incident brings about a change in the way in which they henceforth behave. White, through these stories, tries to bring out the pathos inherent in human existence and the often inevitable tragic turn that one's life takes. Human beings may try their best to influence or interfere in the lives of others, but life will continue to flow unchanged. White's vision of man as reflected in these three short stories thus can be said to be encompassing a large range of emotions in human relationships, specially conjugal relationships. His portrayal of these characters who are typically Australian men and women bring before us the picture of the life led by his fellowmen and also universalizes them through the depiction of the everyday feelings and emotions which are eternal through the limited space of the shorter version of the prose narrative. Thus one may say that White's view of human life in these three stories is tinged with sadness, sorrow and suffering which will follow brief spells of happiness and fulfillment.

These stories bring to our mind the relationships portrayed by the great novelist Thomas Hardy whose novels like *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* et al deal with the complex conjugal relationships and emotions. Thus the readers may sense the workings of an all powerful force which can alter the course of his characters' lives and appear as a barrier before them which in turn will only highlight the underlying tragic strain in man's everyday existence. In this respect we may find some similarity in the tragic vision of these two writers who depict the intervention of an uncontrollable force in the lives of their simple characters.

Works Cited:

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