

**AUSTRALIA AS A SPIRITUAL METAPHOR: A QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN PATRICK WHITE'S VOSS**

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**Abstract**

*The novel Voss (1957) by Australian novelist, Patrick White is a work of art contrived to deal the theme of exploring the Australian landscape by explorers. Although the novel's concern is related to a search for identity for the protagonist as well as the writer and it is designed to play thematic concern of topographical journey in linear pattern. The naïve and artless hero Voss exploring the vast land of Australia synchronizes his own quest for identity and as readers we get acquainted with the Australian national history, the conflict between settlers and aborigines. The colonizers and settlers wanted to make opportunities from this half 'desert' and half 'garden' land while the aborigines were fighting for their rights. The Jindiworobak movement by Rex Ingamells is worth mentioning that tried to symbolize Australian land for individualism and identity. White is absolutely fit to be called the central figure of national writer as he revived and developed the aborigines' fight and 'Australianness' in fiction. The paper will try to analyze the possibilities of Australian landscape into the narrative spiritual phenomenon to know the 'self'.*

**Introduction:**

The novel *Voss* was written when White returned from War and worked on old records and reached to the actual experience of German explorer Ludwig Leichhardt. In one of his letters he spoke of the novel, "When I returned here (Australia) after the war and began to look up old records, my idea seemed to fit the character of Leichhardt. The letter was, besides, merely unusually unpleasant, where *Voss* s made as well. I always wanted to write the story of a grand passion (1). The novel is written in a linear pattern horizontally and delineates the esoteric relation of Laura and Voss in symmetrical and non-symmetrical as well. One is exalted and eulogized and other is epitomized and becomes the voice of dissent. The cryptic land which is deciphered by Voss ultimately submerges himself into her history; in his words, "To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself". *Voss*, in Adrian Mitchell's words, "has established the mythic potentialities of Australian history, set a fashion for heavily symbolic and imagery-ridden writing, and localized the journey of exploration as

spiritual metaphor” (150). In the novel it is not Voss to be concerned but Australia itself is the *prima facie*. The colonial identity of Australia is an expository of the nature of settlers and explorers as British lineage delusive and complicit to make fortune out of this ‘foreign’ and ‘incomprehensible’ land paralleled with the indigenous and aborigines presenting them archival to these colonizers. Every character has its own understanding of the land. Most settlers of Australia were of English and Irish origin. After 1851 settlers came to Australia rushing to find gold and between 1852 to 1861 several people came to this “land of opportunity.” The commonwealth of Australia was formed as a result of the alliance of the colonies on January 1, 1901. The Aborigines were granted citizenship only in 1967 and Australia began to follow the multicultural policy in 1973.

However, the substantive point of the novel is not to envisage cartographical and topographical journey but to discern the identities within the spiritual framework of traverse. The beginning of the novel starts from urban, insular and bland society of New South Wales a place of transplanted British society. Voss the main protagonist of the novel is described as, one whose powers are concentrated with ferocious intensity upon an inner life. The outer world is either a nuisance or a menace. (Walsh, 44). Johann Ulrich Voss and some travellers came on an expedition to Mr. Bonner main sponsor of the expedition. But the expedition culminates not a geographical one but expedition of mind and problems they face physically and mentally as well. Although the plot is a matrix of successive processes. Voss exhorting and transgressing in his expedition remains aloof from the crass society except Laura Trevelyan, a woman of her own self-understanding and always lost in her thoughts. Voss with his party comes to Bonner family and does not much reverberate with his reticent and German accent. But Laura understanding the festering society around her appreciates and infers, “He does not intend to make a fortune out of this country, like other men. He is not all money talk” (28). The character of Voss is made out of modern Western man in self-search and the quest to be profound; he remains here for “two years and four months” till death. Voss’s journey is a kind of self-realization for him. The man always has a longing to conquer the self. Australia seems to be extended in his consciousness and the entire outside world becomes incoherent to him. His hubris or pride wants to dive deeper into the infinite geographical boundaries and conquer it but ultimately his ego disintegrated against the force of nature, “All that was external to himself he mistrusted, and was happiest in silence, which is immeasurable like distance, and the potentialities of the self (4).” He has self-imposed isolation in him His ego does not content with purpose but with the genius in man, he says to Le Mesurier,

“That remains to be seen. Every man has a genius, though it is not always discoverable. Least of all when choked by the trivialities of daily existence. But in this disturbing country, so far as I have become acquainted with it already, it is possible more easily to discard the inessential and to attempt infinite. You will be burnt up more likely, you will have the flesh torn from your bones, you will be tortured probably in many horrible and primitive ways, but you will realize that genius of which you are possessed, and of which you will tell me you are afraid.”(35)

The other prominent character Laura Trevelyan, a British born Australian self-absorbed and always self-pitying she cannot find her position in this imposed society. She has always a fear for this country so 'foreign and incomprehensible' (9): White commenting on her state of mind says, "She was also afraid of the country which, for lack of any other, she supposed was hers. But this fear, like certain dreams, was something to which, she would never have admitted" (11). Her hypocritical and snobbish nature conceals her true self which is unravelled by Voss. The character of Laura is made convincing by White as she an orphan girl tries to immerse herself into Bonner family, but neither her aunt Emmy nor her uncle Edmund could entrench any proper intellectual understanding with her. Her cousin Belle has some affinity with her but her girlish nature cannot quench her thirst of intellect. She is isolated and marginalized as Voss is marginalized at Bonner's place for his funny and enclosed appearance and in aborigines' province being White Western man. Though the meeting of Voss and Laura are reduced to only some picnic and party but there develops a spiritual and emotional communion between them. At the picnic, there White creates a picture of mental parity, "It is not exactly clear what they should do, only that they were suddenly faced with a great gap to fill, of space, and time... Words, silences, and air had worked upon them subtly, until they had undergone a change" (96).

Though the placid nature of Voss does not suggest conspicuously his convoluted feelings for Laura, but at Rhine Towers he writes his longing of an ideal relationship with her, "I would ask you to join me in thought and exercise of will, daily, hourly, until I may return to you" (153). This surreptitious relation was absolutely psychological and stupor. Voss and Laura, both struggles with physical and psychic conflict respectively. The child of Rose, Mercy is a 'visible token of love' (236), of her 'true marriage' (217) with Voss. The child Mercy is intended as a true Australian vision in the novel; this child, born in Australia symbolizes Australian dream and a result of communion of Voss and Laura and adoption of true Australian spirit.

Returning to the exponential journey of Voss with his party on *Osprey*, White galvanizes the plot with besieging characters in the novel. Judd, the ex-convict sways Voss with his compliant and immaculate nature. But it also envious Voss and unleashes his ego and uneasiness for Judd,

"It was necessary for him to enjoy complete freedom, whereas this weight had begun to threaten him...as he entered in advance that vast, expectant country, whether of stone deserts, veiled mountains, or voluptuous, fleshy forests. But his. His soul must experience first, as by some spiritual droit de seigneur, the excruciating passage into its interior. Nobody here, he suspected, looking round, had explored his own mind to the extent that would enable him to bear such experience. Except perhaps the convict, whose mind he could not read.

The convict had tempered in hell, and, as he had said, survived." (137)

The figure of Judd 'loomed like sculpture' (195) on Voss. The arrogance of Voss has a reverberating effect of this person. The main cause of suffering him is not accepting humility

which Laura always emphatically insists. Their party going ahead from the vision of uninterrupted space and freshness of lily to desert and scorching heat becomes a trial of their patience and hopes and they try to learn a respect for the vicinity. But the suffering of Voss still looms larger; due to his trepidation he cannot clamp either to learn or to accept humility. White in *Prodigal Son* once said, "The state of simplicity and humility is the only desirable one for artist or man", (1958: 39). White elaborates this as a state of grace and dignity where a man stands with his self-knowledge and tries to grab the divine powers and mysteries surround him and include in death. Laura learns humility by dissolving her 'self' in love for Voss and Voss despite his detest to it has to learn it. The physical debility of Voss cannot decrease power of Judd in spite of his personal history as being a convict. In a letter to Laura he does write to it and confesses,

"...you will see you have inspired some degree of that humility which you so admire and in me have wished for... as I sit her alone in this immense country. No ordinary House could have contained my feelings, but this great one in which greater longings are ever free to grow...Judd is what people call a good man. He is not a professional saint, as is Mr. Palfreyman. He is a tentative one, ever trying his dubious strength, if not in one way, then, in another. (216)

Laura is prevailed upon him that he thinks she has taken a human form temporarily. The story develops convulsively, Rose gives birth to a child and after some time she dies; Mercy becomes the daughter of Laura,; during Journey both Voss and Laura have visions of each other, Judd forms a separate party, Aborigines impinge the expedition, Palfreyman is killed by natives, and finally Judd, Turner, and Ralph take permission to go back from expedition. But still Voss remains determined not to give up his expedition, his confidence in future never fails him his hope. Although the journey is cleft and abrogated by aborigines and we confront some ritualistic exercises. The boy Jackie though not a member of that tribe, beheaded Voss's head and put it into the feet that now he thinks his master. After his death, his blood met with the mystic land and into Australian dream. His dream of exploring the land has fled with air, and his blood runs on the earth which immediately dries and drinks it up. But some of critics do not consider the death of Voss a *Sine qua non*, as the death of Voss is thus ritualised in a way more appropriate to Macbeth than to the customs of our aborigines. I cannot accept this dismemberment of the German. I think it happens because of a hysterical wish in the mind of Voss's creator, who needed, required, something as shocking as this to happen (Trojan Press, 187). But once White said in the novel from Voss that to make oneself, it is necessary to destroy oneself. Thus I think the death of Voss was inevitable as the expedition which was going to be a part of history, never completed because the country proves hostile to that of planned development and the desert prefers to resist history, though it does make a history but of its own line. David Marr concludes,

"Voss's expedition was not a failure, though he found no new pastoral Eden, made no maps, lost all the specimens his party collected, and failed to reach

the sea on the far side of the continent. Though his suffering in the desert, Voss conquered his pride.”(312)

During the final phase of Voss’s journey a telepathic relation develops between Laura and Voss. When Voss is captured by aborigines, Laura is caught under the spell of mysterious fever but miraculously she is cured when Voss dies. Their inchoate relation and journey ends but it reinstates a new consciousness in Laura and after twenty years she saturates herself as a school-teacher, a head-mistress now and an imaginary writer. Now Sydney looks more cultured and mature than it was at the beginning of the novel. Laura is still recluse and gossiped about her daughter as an illegitimate child of hers. A party is organized by her cousin Belle while unveiling the statue of Voss. Here, Laura explains Voss’s expedition to a party of explorer, “Knowledge was never a matter of geography. Quite a reverse, it overflows all maps that exist. Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind” (446). It seems that whatever she read, or spoke was compilation of her record of their first moment of becoming acquainted. Voss has become a historical figure and celebrated with prose written in newspaper, and history books. But Laura never believes in history and she crosses Mr. Hebden,

“Mr. Voss is already history.”

“But history is not acceptable until it is sifted for the truth. Sometimes this can never be reached.”(413)

Her preconceived notion about Australia has now been totally shifted to a true essence of reality; she is also purged like Voss and believes to understand the country, which she like others was presumptuous. With the death of Rose she also buries some of her part in it. She admits that a country does not develop through the wealth of merchants and colonizers, but the sufferings of the humble. Now she can lay her head on the ugliest rock and feel at rest in the land. In her quotidian life she never shuns to think the same answer to the question which troubled Voss during his life.

White succeeds in seeking to grasp the phases of past and future and reaches to an epistemological understanding of life and existence into the strangeness of this land. The lives of these explorers were like existentialists confined to void and insipid but White, there embarked and their lives liable to precipitate a change through simplicity and humility in the unconscious landscape of Australia.

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