

**DISTURBING PAST AND CHAOTIC PRESENT: A RE-READING OF PATRICK WHITE'S VOSS**

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Contemporary writings and reading practices seem to be changing from the traditional ways of approaching literature. The traditional concept of the disciplinary boundaries has been undermined by the postcolonial critics and Literature is no more considered as separate from other disciplines. In his *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* Bart Moore Gilbert talks about the “importance of studying literature together with history, politics, sociology and other art forms rather than in isolation from the multiple material and intellectual contexts which determine its production and reception” (54). Taking this reading strategy of postcolonial critics, here I attempt a re-reading of Patrick White's *Voss* in terms of Australian history.

Fictional reconstruction of history often seeks an active intellectual engagement with the past where writers address historical moments as a way of imposing a contemporary interpretation on the past. Instead of just narrating history through an imaginative realm of fiction, historical fiction invokes a revisionist attitude towards the past. While representing the past, it stimulates the reader to reflect on it, and on its links with the present. It asks the reader to revisit history and to interrogate the accepted truths about the country and its people. As White acknowledges in *The Prodigal Son*, *Voss* is based on the story of the German explorer Ludwig Leichhardt's expeditions in Australia, therefore one of the prime concerns of the novel is the history of 19<sup>th</sup> century European exploration and settlement.

Being a serious historical novel, *Voss* provides a further insight into White's determination to re-engage with the Australian history, society and culture by making his narrative and characters historically referential. White cites the journals of Leichhardt and Eyre as his chief sources for the novel's composition. In the context of this novel the role of explorer is very crucial. It is through the explorer the imperialist powers reach towards new lands. He works as a tool of European imperialism. So the figure of explorer gets, in Cynthia Driesen's words “an aura of heroism of lonely courage and endurance, as he is pictured battling uneven odds on foreign terrain and pitted against savage hostile forces” (Cynthia VanDen Driesen). This heroic image of the explorer often eclipses the axiomatics of imperialism which he carries and the contribution he makes to the imperials encroachments. Cynthia driesen records the mass appeal that the books of the explorers achieved in the Victorian public through the words of Henry Reynolds: “explorers walk tall through the pages of Australian historiography”.

This heroic figure which is attributed to the explorer simultaneously brands the land as the villain. The explorer's effort to tame the hostility of the landscape is always been celebrated in such narratives. The explorer carries forward the tasks of the imperial man in the new land by mapping, naming the places, rivers, etc. the traces of this imperial man is evident in the character of Voss the explorer when he replies to Mr. Bonners: "the Map? ... I will first make it" (*Voss* 26). The quest of exploring a new land and the willing to bring a country into existence through expedition makes the central character more like an imperial conqueror. The lands which are conquered and named were never being checked in terms of its ownership. The question of Aboriginal people's land ownership is hardly mentioned in the writings of explorers. Voss is introduced as a foreigner in the very beginning of the novel. When he comes to Mr. Bonner's house the servant lady describes him "a kind of foreign man" to her mistress Laura. From that point Voss is addressed several times as 'German' by the other characters which concretize the foreignness of Voss. "...two blacks came round the corner of the house. Their bare feet made upon the earth only a slight, but very particular sound, which to the German's ears, at once established their ownership" (169). This consciousness of being an outsider in a new landscape is always present in Voss which inspires him to conquer it from the east to west. Voss gets two Aboriginal men as his guides and servants in his journey. Here the position of the Aboriginal people is important. They are considered as inferior to white people that they are assigned the jobs of servants. Through representing Aborigines through the eyes of white people as 'uncivilized' and 'wild men' Patrick white sets a colonial background for the journey his hero undertakes.

In the western imperialistic discourse, the Aboriginal world is constructed as, to quote Janmohammed:

a world at the boundaries of civilization, a world that has not been domesticated by European signification or codified in detail by its ideology. That world is therefore perceived as uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable and ultimately evil. Motivated by his desire to conquer and dominate, the imperialist configures the colonial realm as a confrontation based on differences in race, language, social customs, cultural values, and modes of production.

Stereotyping the Others from the self is a discursive strategy in the colonial discourse. Homi Bhabha observes this as "a form of discourse crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchisation".

The novel carries the common assumption of romanticizing the expedition while showing the Aboriginal people as the obstruction in the way. It again channelizes the imperialist view of the Aborigine as 'uncivilized' and 'violent'; on the other hand it shows the explorers as nice human being who want to be friends with Aborigines. This kind of stereotyping of attributing the evil characters and habits upon the Aboriginal people as it is inherent in their blood permeates through colonial narratives.

The novel narrates incidents where Aborigines are represented as a potential threat in the way of exploration. As the team of explorers enters into the realm of Aborigines, there is shift in the power. The novel slowly takes its turn from the unyielding temperament of white man into a position where the white supremacy is at stake. Voss becomes more dependent on Dugald and Jackie, the two Aborigines in the team. There are instances which show how these two Aborigines exercise their power over the white by avoiding and not listening to them. Soon after joining the expedition team “the two blacks jogged along, a little to one side of Voss, as if the subjects of his new kingdom preferred to keep their distance” (191). The instances where the illusion of white hegemony is challenged by the Aborigines are keenly recorded in the novel. They make Voss understand the control over black is something which is problematic. The incident where Voss asks their help to communicate with blacks and when they don't pay attention to him then that is a way of resistance for them by blocking Voss from having communication with black people. They don't want Voss to have access to or friendship with black people. This should be read in a continuum of Dugald tearing the last letters of Voss. Denying access to communicate with other people is a colonial strategy which has been subverted in this instance.

The novel turns its attention more towards recording the resistance of Aborigines against the white encroachment on their territory. Through stealing the horses and other things from the explorers, they started to overpower the whites. Their physical presence is manifested in the novel: “everybody looked and saw a group of several black fellows assembled in the middle distance” the scared explorers assign Palfreyman as an emissary between the two groups, but the hostile “black man warded off the white mysteries with terrible dignity. He flung his spear. It struck the white man's side and hung down quivering ... Mr. Palfreyman was already dead when the members of the expedition arrived at his side and took him up. Nor was there a single survivor who did not feel that part of him had already died” (342-43). This is the first violent resistance of black people against the imperial explorers. This should be noted that with this very first attack they put an unexpected turn in the course of the expedition that half of the team members decided not to continue the journey.

The novel continues to record the resistance of Aboriginal people against the invaders, by denying any kind of friendship to Voss even Jackie, the servant at the time of danger left Voss and joined with Aborigines. He affiliates himself with the Aborigine “these black fellars want Jackie. I go. Black fellar no good along White men. This my people” (65). Voss is hopeless but tries for a ‘black fella white man friendship’ which is again rejected by Jackie. This scene is important in the postcolonial reading of the novel because, through Jackie's rejection of Voss and acceptance of blacks, the text emphasises a reassertion of the sovereignty of the black world. The white man's power is questioned to its extreme through the murder of Voss.

In fact, even long before this climatic incident, at Jildra, the place just before the native land, the white supremacy starts to vanish as Voss becomes dependent on Aborigines. When Dugald leaves, Voss is shown as completely dependent on Jackie for everything like bringing

the horses, searching the lost, etc. it's evident from the instances where Voss becomes happy to see him after his disappearance, and giving him rewards without any question.

It can be argued that the Aborigines in the novel are shown as unreliable citing the example of Jackie changes his allegiance from Voss to blacks and also Dugald's withdrawal from the journey. But this should be interpreted as the evidence of their rejection of white domination. Jackie's transfer should be understood in a way that after being with Voss as an assistant and a servant, Jackie understood that Voss can't protect the black people and the invaders are hostile to the Aboriginal cultures and belief system. There is again another subversion of the knowledge claims of the colonial discourse that white's used to have over others. Here in the novel, Jackie, a black Aborigine imparts knowledge about the Aboriginal culture and their spirituality to his white audience. The novel inscribes this European encounter with Aborigines' culture in the cave scene where Voss asks Jackie to explain the myth of snake. Jackie replies "snake, Jackie explained. Father my father, all black feller." To Jackie's explanation Voss replies finally: "now I understand, said Voss gravely. He did. To his finger tips. He felt immensely happy" (275). This episode also shows the ability of Aborigines to articulate their feelings and believes in an effective manner. In fact, exploration acts as an important factor in bringing Aboriginal culture and belief system to the European world. By letting Jackie explain his culture and belief system, the text establishes a sense of pride of the Aborigines in the richness of their own culture. Towards the end of the novel, Voss comes across with the spirituality of the Aboriginal world in the scene where a comet appears in the sky which Aborigines believe as a manifestation of the deity. Here again it is Jackie who explains the cultural significance of that to Voss.

In short, the novel Voss posits the psychology of the explorer as a metaphor of imperial man. The unyielding ego and pride of the imperial power perishes in the desert of Aborigines humility. Re-reading Voss with a historical consciousness brings in the ways literature reflects or inscribes that historical moment. Such a reading will evoke the blending of present chaos with the disturbing past of colonialism.

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