

The Cosmic and Acosmic — a redefinition of Being and Time in Patrick White's *Voss*

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“Akam Sat; Viprā baahudhā vadanti”

(That which Is, is one. Wise men speak of it in many ways) Rig Veda

The novels of Nobel laureate Patrick White (1912-1990) had earned the phrase “difficult novels of a difficult man” which inadvertently has come to stay. In his own words, he has been regarded as “an intruder, a breaker of rules, a threat to the tradition of Australian Literature” (*Flaws in The Glass* 139). However, the way Patrick White deals with the mysteries of *Being* and *Time* and explores the nature of reality provides some interesting insight in the genre of speculative fiction of the twentieth century.

My paper would therefore necessitate the inquiry of the intuitive and the rational towards the realization of a transcendent reality in Patrick White's *Voss* (1957), and the arrangement and juxtaposition of images and metaphors found in Vedic and Upanishadic literature to determine “the core of reality” (Mcgregor ed.219) in this highly mystical and ambiguous novel. Mine shall be an attempt to bring in through this study the potentialities and complexities of the Vedic split of the “cosmic and acosmic” of Being and Time as projected across two different transcultural spaces, the Australian and the Indian. I would like to consider if this split of time-consciousness signify a timeless reality or a unifying force.

The eponymous hero Voss's life is based on the real German explorer Ludwig Leichhardt, who disappeared in the Australian wilderness in 1848. Patrick White had conceived of writing *Voss* during the early days of the Blitz, when reading Eyre's *Journal* in a London bedsitting room.

This epic tale about a man's journey into the heart of the Australian desert and into his own heart and mind is a classic of modern literature. Here Patrick White interweaves the indigenous and the foreign with endless play of meanings against the visual and the spatial. Voss is obsessed by a long-held ambition to set off into the interiors of an immense unmapped desert with an ill assorted ragtag of followers: "I shall cross the continent from one end to the other" (*Voss* 33). The first

part deals with the preparation for the journey against the backdrop of the nineteenth century Sydney.

Around the narrative of the expedition is woven the relationship of Voss and Laura Trevelyn, niece of one of the patrons of the project. The second part shows the expedition entering the innermost deserts of Australia, facing extreme physical suffering, decay, death, mutiny and ultimate annihilation at the hands of the natives. On this voyage, with the journey out and the journey back, which is “a journey to hell an' back” (Voss 43) is a structure ironically duplicated on time travel. With its stark and solid backdrops of visual colours, of startling exposure to the savagely primitive, there comes a rejection of time, which is almost always playful, and the need to clear oneself a space. Side by side is developed the psychic relationship of Voss and Laura through dreams and letters. The third part, covering several years after the rest, serves as an epilogue where Laura and Judd, the only survivor of the expedition, offers tribute to Voss.

On the concept of time to apprehend the density of experience in the self, the attention is laid half upon the past and the present, and half on the future. The subjective domain of memory, body consciousness and sensory world perceptions lead to the nature of authenticity of time and freedom rediscovered in the self. Then the tragedy of man's homelessness, both personal and cosmic and social relatedness:

To the misanthrope Voss possessed of seemingly unshakeable belief in his own divinity, the future is nothing but will, to go “barefoot, and alone” (Voss 69). We see him grappling in the Australian wilderness with the rocks of his own prejudice and hatred and yearns for Laura's “strength of innocence.”(ibid152). But he himself is also a desert, vast and ugly, strengthened by his “vision of uninterrupted space.”(Ibid 189). As Voss tells Le Mesurier “To make yourself it is also necessary to destroy yourself (ibid 34).

Laura waits in Sydney, syntactically reinventing the resistant trace of space or time. When Voss and Laura are not together, the relationship takes place in the mind, with some sort of sixth sense resulting in a synchronisation of feelings. Amazingly, their love blossoms across time, transcending the barriers of a class driven society. In them, there is endlessness, being “nowhere and everywhere at once”(Voss 239). It is testament to the author's imaginative powers and his skill as a novelist that their transcendent union, despite the hundreds of miles between them, is consummated with a wedding and a newborn child.

Time, properly understood, is not an elusive enigma in this search for totality of consciousness without any division, is there a link between memory, nostalgia and forgetting? Or is it a travel through time, of “being” and in love? Is it a constant process of negotiation and exchange

between the chronological and the psychological or a preoccupation with death and eternity? The Absolute, which is timeless, is reflected in some fashion in the world of space and time. The identity of the Supreme Self *Tat Tvam Asi* (That Thou Art) lies in the implication that we live by time and that we are the result of time. There can be no thought without memory because memory itself is time. Can the past or memory, the result of time, the cumulative effect of many experiences dissolve all at once?

In *Voss* it is a journey deep into the human condition where Time is neither a condition, nor a purposeless obstacle to some Truth where the chronological past becomes the present. The experiencer and the experienced are a joint phenomenon. Solitude as a means of cultivating sensitivity becomes a necessity. The intense experiences of sublimity in rare moments are those where the flux of time seemed to merge with a deep silence, and a sense of oneness, which is almost flagrant. As the observer watching the whole structure of consciousness, *Voss* becomes aware choicelessly: "True knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind" (*Voss* 446).

Voss is also about Australia and its national identity, combining an English strain, a German strain, and an aboriginal strain. Weaving all these yarns together, White's writing achieves, as in his other novels, an Australian text of extraordinary depth and proportions, which conveys and contains a multiple cultural identity. There are several questions being raised. Does life transcend time? Is time a dimension of the eternal, which can transform the past as well as the present, changing and re-ordering the artistic heritage? Probably, for White, transcendence resides not beyond but within, where the basic psyche merges with the soul and consciousness in celebration of what can be appropriately called in White's words as "the mystery of Unity" (*The Prodigal Son* 118).

In *White*, it is an understanding of the whole process of time, which is basically the timeless, to be free of the memory of time that is radically not in keeping with that of discursive meaning. It leads to a specific cultural identity – a theme that is central to the novel's design and further there is the weaving of the web that integrates several cultures, and anchors it in the geography of the land, its sands, deserts, scrubs, rocks and dead trees, and in the lives of the different inhabitants of the land, the aboriginal tribes, convicts, ex-convicts, immigrants (old and new), and the offspring of the originally English families born on the Australian continent.

A parallel consciousness in *Voss* reveals "the core of reality" (McGregor ed.219) a concentrated visualization of the stages of consciousness that lead inward from the everyday polar play of ignorance-*Avidya* to the logic shattering paradox of eternity and time to the realization of the Universal Self (*Brahman- Atman*).

All these lead to a comprehension that the one is nothing and the whole plurality of being is not quenched but rather confirmed in the one, and God is not the denial of man and of the cosmos but rather their affirmation. Patrick White integrates the discovery of an aboriginal form of spirituality, that is the religious beliefs belonging to another culture:

“As [Jackie] placed his hands together, in the shape of a pointed seed. against his own breast, and opened them skyward with a great whooshing of explanation, so that the silky, white soul did actually escape, and lose itself in the whirling circles of the blue sky, his smile was radiant”(Voss 243.)

This invisible seed-shaped soul, which is seen, here soaring skywards, refers to the souls of all the dead, whose countless multitude inhabits the outback. and whose invisible presences float among the aborigines and the explorers. So that, at his death, Voss's soul goes to join the other souls, and becomes part of this community of spirits that hover between sky and land in the heart of the Australian continent.

Here one does not fail to perceive Whites dominant use of Buddhist *Mandala* symbolism and the progression of the cyclical design or the mandalic pattern, which forms the ideal motif of life in Patrick White's creative perception. The awareness of pure being, that the protagonist try to achieve in his own way, as well its skilful presentation is thus inherent in the basic structure.

Mandalas are arrangements or patterns which give expression to the infinite possibilities of the human subconscious . In Hindu and Buddhist religions, a *mandala* is supposed to aid concentration by restricting psychic vision to the centre...Its geometric structure with its intricate linear composition is conceived and designed as a support to meditation---more precisely to a concentrated visualization and intimate inner experience of the polar play and logic- shattering paradox of eternity and time. Mandalas are symbols of the Universe and its energy, a dynamism in the eternal procreative moment exhibited in a static pattern of geometrical repose. This is the archetypal Hieros Gamos, or 'mystical marriage' represented in an abstract diagram—a key to the secret of the phenomenal mirage of the world”(Zimmer 147) Philosophically, in the *Upanisads*, the concept of “Becoming” is *replaced* by three static states of temporal existence: “Appearance, Extinction, and Continuance.” (Nakamura, *The Notion of Time in India*). In Indian thought, as in the Sanskrit language, it is the idea of “Being” which receives central consideration through time. In Indian philosophy the “Absolute” is generally explained as a “Being” beyond all temporal appearances.

We are faced here with measured time space or durations such as aspects of continuity, contemporaneity, future and past time, all as functional but opposed to incidental dimensions of the life world.. In much the same way, the Indian conception of “time” and “space” is conceived statically rather than dynamically. But the transcendence of Time, Space and Self indicate the widening of consciousness, which is itself not freed from the time sense. This is a unique experience because Life and time are eternally associated, and hence it becomes difficult to understand experience, which oversteps time.

It becomes amply clear to any perceptive reader that in treating the subtle edges of experience and the nature of reality as a whole, White presented what may be called “the crystallization of a mode of experience which is the act of literary creation”(Murry 52). He wanted to convey the immensity of space, within and without, giving a fresh cosmic dimension to the eternal Truth, as envisaged in the Upanishads that consciousness is infinite and absolute. Transcendence resides not beyond but within, where the basic psyche merges with the soul and consciousness in celebration of what can be appropriately called “the mystery of Unity”(The Prodigal Son 118).

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