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## WRITING LANDSCAPE: METAPHORICITY OF SPACE IN PATRICK WHITE'S VOSS

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### ABSTRACT:

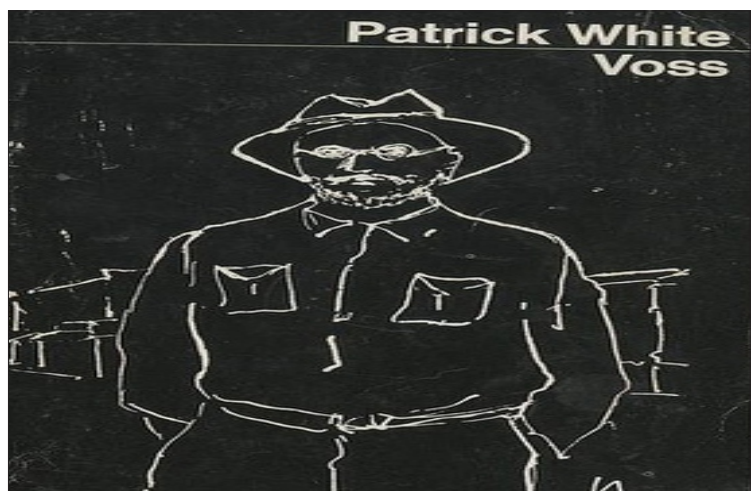
**P**atrick White, Australia's biggest literary figure, ever remained a difficult novelist for those readers whose habit of realistic literature prevented them to see beyond those boundaries which Patrick White, more often than not, crushes and crosses in order to address the emptiness of human life and its transcendence. Landscape, in his novels, is a metaphor of many things: it not only symbolizes spiritual vacuum and dreariness of Australian life, it is also a space of reconciliation with the divine, of self-discovery, of redemption, of a challenge posed to the White advent on the Australian land, of alienation that the settlers suffered on a terra nullius, etc.. It also suggests the White guilt of forced occupation of a land inhabited by the aborigines for ages. It is also a space that dismantles, deconstructs and smashes the self for its new avatar or redemption. In this sense, landscape in White's novels, becomes a mindscape that needs to be essentially comprehended in order to get a full grip of his oeuvre.

**KEYWORD:** Patrick White, spiritual vacuum, landscape, contestation, metaphor, Australia, desert, Voss, material ugliness, exploration, creativity, progressivist ideology.

### INTRODUCTION :

Patrick White is not only Australia's greatest writer for introducing 'a new continent into literature' and for being celebrated for winning prizes but also an imaginative author who has immense contribution to the refashioning of cultural nationalism of Australia by connecting to it at a crucial switching point when this country was conceiving of itself as an independent nation-state rather than a British colony; at a crossroad "where the British links could

no longer actively be mobilized, and where the nation required uniquely national icons" ( During 12). Being troubled with 'the Great Australian Emptiness' that he found in the deadly dull life of Australia, White tried in his fiction to convey a splendor, a transcendence which he found there above human realities. Patrick White was disenchanted by and troubled with emptiness that not only stretched across Australian life but literature too. Australia for him was a "backwater inhabited almost exclusively



by philistines." (Williams 4).

While dealing with his representative themes of emptiness, transcendence and individual's quest for wholeness, landscape-physical and imaginary- gave him ample space to populate his fictional world with complex characters and intricacies of human life other than mere material one. Australian landscape was more than physical setting of his fiction; rather all his literary output – symbolism, vision, mysticism - can be located in the landscape of Australian imagination. Landscape is a metaphor of many things: it not only symbolizes spiritual vacuum and dreariness of Australian life, it is also a space of reconciliation with the divine, of self-discovery, of a challenge posed to the White advent on the Australian land; of alienation that the settlers suffer on a terra nullius and it also suggests the White guilt of forced occupation of a land inhabited by the aborigines for ages. In this sense, landscape in White's novels becomes a mindscape that needs to be essentially comprehended in order to get a full grip of his oeuvre. Carolyn Bliss, commenting on White's use of landscape in his oeuvre, agrees with this idea:

White uses the landscape of the Australian interior as a metaphor for the quest towards an understanding of the human limitations and the greater reality which transcends them. Most certainly in *Voss*, but also in *The Aunt's Story*, *The Tree of Man* and *A Fringe of Leaves*, landscape can stand for the journey to discovery and as emblem of the discovery itself. ( )

Ryszard W. Wolny also endorses this fact that the desert's emptiness in White's fiction is "both symbolic of Australian spiritual vacuum as well as a mystic space of reconciliation with the divine ..." (11). The spiritual vacuum, Australian averageness, shallowness, mediocrity and emptiness of its mindscape has a major concern in his writings. He was set out to replace material ugliness with things spiritual and eternal to heighten life. The unsettling, unexplored and unknown Australian landscape- bush, island, or desert- is a fascination for White as a mystic space of reconciliation with the divine and realization of the true self in *A Tree of Man*, *A Fringe of Leaves*, *Eye of the Storm* and *Voss*. The view of the Nature as a hostile force, as we find in *Happy Valley* undergoes a change in *The Riders in the Chariot* where a harmonious relationship of the four luminaries can be noticed with the natural surroundings.

This paper proposes to study the metaphoricity and figurality of landscape in *Voss* where the desert is not only a central character, a central tool to understand the novel but also a very central metaphor of Australia's consciousness; its quest, struggle, suffering and redemption. Most of the White's criticism focuses on the spiritual aspect of this metaphor, but if read closely with the theory of ideology, this appears to be a subversive strategy to counter the progressivist colonial ideology. Whereas the White settlers perceived of the Australian continent as terra nullius and its desert merely a physical site of wilderness, Patrick White subverts the white 'masculinist' ideology and presents the outback a space of spiritual fulfillment.

Space can be defined not only at objective levels of physics or cartography or at the personal level of 'individual cognitive mapping' but also in its social dimensions. So space has three aspects: physical, mental and social. Though all these three categories, seem independent of each other, but the first two are affected by the third. Both ideational and physical categories are socially produced, as Simon Ryan writes that "the individual's notion of space is determined by his or her socialization...through institutions of society" (4). When the colonizers talked about space, they could not refer to it outside its cultural and linguistic construction into an unmediated reality. They perceived the space of their conquered lands merely as a geographical entity to cater to their material pursuits. Their desire was to conquer and exploit the body than establishing a spiritual bond with it. In his context it was certain that Australian desert would appear hostile and strange to the White settlers because of their distanced relationship with the land whereas the aborigines perceived it a natural part of their everyday life.

In *Voss* the treatment of Australian outback and desert, though truly wonderful and captivating in its capturing of national spirit and cultural heritage, yet is more than mere geographical entity. It is a symbol of 'harshest imaginable' psychological depths. It is a space that dismantles, deconstructs and smashes the self for its new avatar or redemption. In this manner, *Voss's* journey across desert becomes a journey through his interior self; landscape is projected as a 'mindscape', a space of his encounter with his real self stripped of his pride and egotism, through suffering into self-discovery. *Voss's* initial claim is that of a proud White foreign

explorer for whom land is merely a cartographic entity whose map is to be drawn by him, though the novelty of White's approach differentiates him from others.

Voss re-enacts the historical journey of exploration by the Europeans to the Australian continent. Heyness observes that "as a metaphor of the whole continent (desert) allows White to critique the processes of imperialism and colonization as well as carrying resonances of the 1950s..." (243). The explorations, which otherwise were apparently colonial ambition for the furthering of the empire's frontiers, were mythologized as heroic endeavors of the individual explorers, not for the material gains but driven "solely by a quest for knowledge" (Ryan 1). And in the colonial discourses and narratives, the readers were interpellated into this progressivist ideology.

White counters and subverts the discourse of material ugliness associated with this project of colonial expansion in which everything else is 'the black, the other'. Voss's White pride melts into humility; his perception undergoes a change where all his socialization of 'the other' by the dominant cultural assumptions proves futile, and a renewed understanding is generated before he dies. Alison Bartlet defines the masculine desire "to classify, to identify, to know the 'I', the nation, the self" (Schaffer 24) as "supplementing lack, which perfectly accommodates the lack of knowledge constructed by a blank map, of a colonized land" (Bartlet 119). She further argues that this desire has become a part of the "national subjectivity as constructed by its settler population", that still finds potency in the image of an explorer and exploration as an organizing metaphor, to such an extent that resistance to it is difficult (Bartlet 119).

Australian landscape has always been a strong influence on its literature though its reflection in literature, varied according to the perception of its white occupants. Desert had usually been narrated as sites of discovery, exploration for finding grazing pastures and mapping by the explorers for practical purposes. And those who could do it "were cherished and rewarded" (Keneally x). The imperial endeavor of exploration necessarily constructs this space as universal and divisible, erasing the possibility of existence of any other community. In their narrative of the land, the interior is painted blank to negate any possibility of Aboriginal population's existence.

The reason for this 'otherization' of the space owes its origin to the history of white advent on the Australian continent under the veil of emptying the English prisons and dumping the convicts in a far off land. The actual intention was to expand the Empire and find a base for Royal Navy in the Eastern Sea. Since 1788, beginning with convict settlement, several nationalities started making Australia their home. This 'terra nullius' certainly posed a strong threat to the settlers in a strange land quite different from their home. The earliest form of Australian English literature grappled with this struggle of taming the wilderness for settlement. This image of Australia as a harsh scrub underwent a shift with the dawning of the 'golden era' in the next half of the 19th century when the people rushed not to an alien and hostile country but to a land of opportunities and promises. These shades of attitudes towards Australia find their reflection in various forms of early literature, comprising mostly diaries or memoirs written to cater to the curiosity of the masters in England who were very eager to know about life in the colonies.

With an emerging demand of independent settlement for creating their Federation, a necessity was felt to establish a national identity in the form of literature for shaping the new nation's identity but this demanded them to free it first from the clutches of the European influences in order to create a literary canon of their own that would be purely Australian in taste and character. Writers like Lawson (Joe Wilson and his Mates), Franklin (My Brilliant Career) & Furphy (Such is Life) were among the pioneers who glorified the outdoor and romanticized & reinforced the Bush for its iconic significance as a symbol of national life, a source of national ideal and self-identity. Australian landscape and ideas about the Australian 'national character' moved to the foreground in fiction at the turn of the 20th century (Goldsworthy 105). Ever since, the Bush became central to any debate on national identity.

Quoting the Dutch seamen of 17th century Carolyn Bliss writes how until recently Australia was regarded as a cursed country of "unnatural monsters...unfinished by their creator" (Bliss 2). On the one hand where Australian landscape provided a base of literary myth to the writers, on the other it provided the colonizers an opportunity to project themselves mighty & superiors, and justify their presence on this land. By



the invasion and taming of the alien, invincible, bleak wilderness they could prove themselves stronger. The explorers were projected as active, brave and tough intellectuals whereas the natives were just ignorant and savages.

Guided by the utilitarian and material pursuits the colonizers had pushed the indigenous people off the shore that had inhabited it since ages. But invading the land for material exploitation and consequent forced adaptation is different from one's assimilation with it. Patrick White's *Voss* takes up this issue of discovery of the essential soul of Australia and one's identification with it. Without this inheritance how can one prove truly Australian? Voss's prototype Leichhardt also had desires not merely material "but greater than commercial payoff (which) was no doubt one of the aspects of his character that attracted White. Leichhardt wished to be a knower of the country he penetrated" (Keneally x).

Australian landscape has had a deep impact on the consciousness of Patrick White. He had served as a commissioned Air Force Intelligence Officer and served in Middle East. His experiences in the Western desert made him read about Australian explorers. Eire's *Journal of Expeditions into Central Australia* evoked a 'terrible nostalgia' of desert landscapes in him. After war he decided to settle in Australia. His autobiographical essay *The Prodigal Son* suggests that he missed Australian landscape most while he was away from it into empty sophistications of London intellectual life. In *Flaws in the Glass* he emphasized the role of Australian landscape, which pulled him back, in his life- first in his settlement and second in his art. He writes: "It was landscape more than anything, which drew me back when Hitler's was over" (16).

White remained unpopular as a writer for quite a long time because he denounces the modern western materiality and mentality, and condemns emptiness in the life of a common man. He substitutes the materialistic attitude with inward richness of the individuals in his fiction (Wolny 13). Australia of those times was not prepared for such literature which, in the words of Dutton, "unsettles the surface of the things" (qtd. in Wolny, 13) to uncover mystery and poetry of life. Landscape, especially the image of desert served a potent metaphor to mirror the emptiness of life. So, Australian landscape, 'the purest well' from which the creative artist draws to quench his thirst of spirituality is central to the study of White's *Voss* which has a varied topographical setting.

*Voss* begins in a semi-urban civilized, gentle and healing landscape at New South Wales, moves to New Castle, Jildra and beyond into an untrodden flat country of secret colors. At the 'nuclei' level the novel is just about Johann Ulrich Voss's (a German explorer & an eponymous hero) sense of adventure and his passion to explore the Australian desert in totality which outwardly seems defeated with his death in the end. But at the indicial level this journey emphasizes his moving beyond mere concrete experientiality to explore the mystical infiniteness of the land. White calls Voss a 'rock of fire' who is determined through his personal will to identify himself with the strange land which the settlers have not been able to understand and accept fully due to its mystical infiniteness. White attempts to articulate a new medium to reach the infinite, as it must be reached, through a new medium other than a usual one.

In *Voss* desert is rather the central character. On being asked by Mr. Bonner if he had studied the map, Voss questions: "The map?...I will first make it" (17). Though this statement has been critically analyzed vividly as expressive of his pride, at the same time there was a need for exploration of a greater part of the middle of the continent of Australia which was still unexplored. For this reason only White set his novel in the nineteenth century based on the Leichhardt's exploration.

Laura compares the vastness and strangeness of relationships with deserts. It is no place of search for money but an arena of suffering and self-discovery. As the novel opens White presents a striking contrast of the settler's attitude to that of Voss's reaction to the strange land. The former's relationship with the future of Australia is based on materiality where that of Voss is based on spiritual grounds "it is the country which belongs by the right of vocation to the great man" (169). Voss has been in Australia only for two years and four months but has developed a greater affinity for this country, than the settlers of New South Wales. He himself says that he was "compelled into this country" (14). In her reply to Tom Redcliff's point of Voss's right to claim Australia as his own country, Laura tells him: "It is his by right of vision" (23).

For Voss whose "hunger was most unbearable" (29), this journey into the desert is something more than

mere expedition. An expedition might be an adventure, a physical mapping of the landscape. Mr. Bonner's preparations merely focus on the organizational part of the journey. But for Voss it is an exploration of the inner heart of Australia, a journey much beyond mere crossing the desert. The narrative goes as: "Unseeing people walked the sandy earth, eating bread, or sat at meat in their houses of frail stone foundations, while the lean man, beneath his twisted tree, became familiar with each blade of withered grass at which he stared, even joints in the body of the ant" (21). His purpose is to become one with the land by willingly knowing and exploring the infinite strangeness of the land. He says: "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 the infinite." (29). And besides all these forms of this journey, it is an unconscious journey into the desert of the soul and immensity of inner darkness where all his egoism, pride and pretensions are to melt.

Here, White has been exploring the possibility of attaining oneness with the strange land which is necessary for the fulfillment of Australian Dream. The essence of this dream is a feeling of oneness and an endeavor to trace the inner being of Australia by developing a closer relationship with the land. The settlers are spiritually and psychologically distanced from it. Laura tells Radclyffe: "It is not my country although I have lived in it" (22). Mr. Bonner, a representative of the Settler Community, dubs it "the country of future" (22). But for the realization of this ideal the people will have to accept the country, know it, understand it, and identify themselves with it, without which the sense of strangeness, isolation & alienation can't be over. The settlers still feel them to be a part of English traditions. The passive and resigned acceptance of the country by the Settlers is brought out in the narrative through point of view: Mr. Bonner is contended at the material "achievement of those men who are settling the land" (22) but Voss, as Laura observes "does not intend to make a fortune out of this country, like other men. He is not all money talk" (22).

The possession of this understanding necessitates a journey through its consciousness, as Voss does, suffers and is ripped of his ('Whiteness') pretensions and pride until he realized that he is not 'God', as Whites would think they were in relation to the Australian land. The 'emptiness' that the settlers found in this landscape, was nothing but a subjectivisation of their own states of mind. Desert as a subjectivised object is not only an artistic object but a natural tendency of Patrick White and his belief in the power of imagination which has challenged many critics. Laura in her first moment of close acquaintance with Voss talks of this subjectivisation. Calling him a desert "so vast and ugly...isolated" (81) she reasons out why he is fascinated by the prospect of desert places in which he finds his "own situation taken for granted, or more than that, exalted" (81). And Laura's own state of mind is subjectivised in Voss himself, as she accepts, "You are my desert" (82). The image of Voss as desert is in equivalence with that of desert by the explorers. He, too, is strange, wild, empty and tough-unwilling to yield. Laura's love-hate relationship also parallels to that of Voss for desert. It needs an exploration into the wilderness of his interior to make it a space of active acceptance contrasted with the passive resignation; and Laura too undertakes this journey on a metaphysical plane. White lifts this Voss-desert relationship to a higher plane where Voss has to endure to prove himself: "I will cross the country from one end to the other I have every intention to know it with my heart" (27) even if "the future of great areas of sand is a purely metaphysical one." (56)

As Voss and his companions Robarts, Le Mesurier, Palfreyman, Turner etc. proceed through Rhine Towers and reach Jildra ("the last outpost before the wilderness") for onward journey, they are attacked by the Aborigines who owned the land much before the White's advent and keep it in the highest esteem. For them, the land is not a commodity rather they live in perfect harmony with nature. Cheryl Glotfelty observes that nature and culture are distinct identities. Nature is non-human whereas Culture is a human construct. The human progress necessitates the subjugation of nature. Barry Commoner found that if one (manmade technosphere) desecralizes nature, the other (natural ecosphere) takes revenge by disasters. Eco-critics see this culture as 'the other' in relation to the natural and the non-human.

The explorers represent the civilized artifice, expedition the human progress & this way the aborigines become agents of the primal simplicity of nature for whom any interference or encroachment of the sacred space is unpardonable. The settlers in the process of establishing the land interfered with the native purity of the country; the scrubs were cleared up, the natives chased off the land and often brutally killed. Let us remember

the White settlement around the Hawksbury River Area which blocked the access of the Aborigines to the river, a source of their survival. Whenever they tried to cross this area they were chased and fired upon for damaging the crops. Voss's confrontation with the Aborigines is ritualistic as it amalgamates, assimilates and absorbs Voss into the native purity for the completion of his identity and belongingness. He undergoes extinction of self-pride and gains self-knowledge through torture in the 'country of mind'.

This conversion of the megalomaniac protagonist Voss relates to Dante's *Commedia* which is about a comeback of a sinful son from a dark wood to his father. Voss struggles and suffers like the Jews of the Exodus who had to face stormy waters, desert and mountains; he falls into a region of "unlikeliness" and experiences a lapse from his inner vision" (Paolini 87) in order to, as St. Augustine reveals, "ascend to God" (qtd. in Paolini 87). Though he fails in his initial attempts but his fall, experience of a spiritual malaise and "excruciating passage into the interior" (137) lead him to conversion through self-knowledge.

Though the portrayal of landscape in the novel is somewhat gloomy and harsh yet it can be concluded from the above discussion that the magnanimity and grandeur of Voss's journey and magnitude of his devotion to his purpose could only be brought out against such a landscape that has capacity to defeat Voss. In the words of Le Mesurier "The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming"(269). Carolyn Bliss calls failure as a pre-requisite for the understanding of the universe (Bliss 11). So, the death of Voss cannot be called his defeat as only through this he has become one with the land hence completing his struggle. V.C Sudheer observes in this context: Although a failure by human standards (Voss) succeeds in spirit. Indomitable spirit gives him immortality (131).

Laura believes that "Voss did not die. He is still there, it is said, in the country and always be. His legend will be written by those, who have been troubled by it"(448). Such an exposition could not be possible in a civilized landscape of NSW and it had to be contrasted to one beyond Jildra. So, the use of a contrasted landscape gave White immense opportunity to deal with many issues that arise during the course of action. Moreover, the vastness of the landscape in Voss is not mere geographical description; at the deeper level of meaning it signifies an insurmountable & indefatigable mindscape of Voss where he single-mindedly pursues his cause. Chellapen also endorses it: "The landscape seems to be an extension of his consciousness whereas his consciousness becomes an interior landscape" (98).

David Marr also strongly argues in this favor that Voss's expedition is not a failure rather his suffering (White's fictional theme) raises him above others by conquering his pride. It makes him consumed into the sublime landscape of Australia. The novel describes his death as being one with the land: "His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out on the dry earth, which drank it up immediately. Whether dreams breathe, or the earth responds to a pint of blood, the instant of death does not tell" (394).

This symbolizes the thirst of the land's acceptance of all those who are eager of assimilation with it. Voss's decapitation suggests disintegration of his western ego and possibility of assimilation with the Australian environment. White projects the inefficacy of the modern western world by throwing it into a new geographic and climatic entity, and explores the possibility of transformation through the process of self-discovery performed in the mind. (Satu)

So, the metaphor of land and landscape used in the novel is a significant tool in the hands of Patrick White to demonstrate all the major themes of his fiction. The metaphor of journey stands for the journey across mindscape for self-realisation. In his other works also, this tool helps White to make his works Australian in nature. The landscape also symbolizes Patrick White's acceptance of Australia and his fruitful attempt to give Australianness to its literature despite being born in England. The legend of Leichhardt had reinforced the image of Australia as "a netherworld that could consume any descending Orpheus" ( Keneally x) but as Hayness observes, Patrick White through his imaginative vision in Voss transforms this apocalyptic image of Australian desert "from dead heart to arena for psychological struggle and spiritual quest" (239). White has been able to influence and transform the Australian consciousness about the interior landscape by presenting it as national inheritance, not a European curse (Keneally xiii) The study reveals that White has subverted the ideology of white masculine superiority and its perception about Australian landscape in Voss, and has envisioned a life full of understanding and humility by transcending the material ugliness. This vision raises him to the stature of a



novelist of universal appeal.

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