

TREATMENT OF SEX AND ECCENTRICITY IN MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF PATRICK WHITE

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ABSTRACT

Patrick White has had written 12 novels, two short-story collections and eight plays. Although he was popularly known as a novelist, the theatre was his first love. He started his career with the writing of revues. An important characteristic feature in the works of Patrick White is the eccentricity in man-woman relationship and the treatment of sex. It is natural for a writer to infuse certain traits of his own, while creating a character. He had created many women characters on the model of his mother. The eccentricity and abnormality in the treatment of sex and man-woman relationship in Patrick White's work and the main reason for that could be traced in the biography of Patrick White.

Key Words: Sex, Man-woman relationship, eccentricity, biographical approach

Patrick White is one of the most eminent novelists, who brought laurels to the Australian literature by winning the Nobel Prize in the year 1973. He was awarded "for an epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature". Patrick Victor Martindale White was born in the year 1912. He has written 12 novels, two short-story collections and eight plays. Although he was popularly known as a novelist, the theatre was his first love. He started his career with the writing of revues. An important characteristic feature in the works of Patrick White is the eccentricity in man-woman relationship and the treatment of sex. The present study analyses the eccentricity in man-woman relationship and the treatment of sex in the selected works of Patrick White.

The Ham Funeral (1947) the first play of White remains a milestone in the history of Australian drama. In the play, White concentrated on the development and growth of an individual. He analyzed the limitations and the factors that prevented an individual from progress. He had also indirectly suggested the ways and means to overcome the problems. The

main character, the young man, continued to think about his own self, his failure as a poet, and his inability to find out the essence of life. His egocentric and the narcissistic natures were the reasons for his failure as a poet. The other two important characters of the play, Mr. Lusty who stands for truth searching intellect and Mrs. Lusty who stands for physical sensuousness. They exposed their own life to the young man. Mr. Lusty was uncommunicative and was leading a withdrawn life. Once, he had been full of energy and vigour, like Samson. His masculine energy was being imprisoned by Mrs. Lusty as Samson was by Delilah. He owned a sweet shop. As his wife was not satisfied with the business, he turned to wrestling. He defeated many veterans in the wrestling field. Appreciation poured in. The first and the foremost in the line of the admirers was his wife, Alma Lusty. But, when his powers got weakened, the reaction from his wife was different. Mr. Lusty said that:

The mob would let fly with their caps and their voices. An' there was always one tart louder than the rest. She told me I'd won. She told me I was Gawd. Then, when I could no longer 'old their faces in the dust, an' the stink of sweat' ad begun to make me sicken, she let me know we'd reached'll by short cut. (H.F.1.4.26-27.)

Mrs. Lusty was not interested in the routine, repeated domestic activities. She expressed her disgust over the mechanical life. She felt that there were many sources of pleasure left in life without her not tasting it. Her hair was still black. She envied rich people's romantic way of life:

Thursday I went to the theayter. It was lovely. A bunch of toffs in satin ... gassing' about love and nothink. An' when I come out, the rain 'ad stopped, an' the blossom sticky on the chestnut trees. You could smell it, that strong and funny. It nearly bust my 'ead open... (Angrily, pushing the potato peelings father away from her) (H.F.1.2.17)

All of a sudden, the Land Lord died. Mrs. Lusty was in mourning. During the funeral, the relatives baited the landlady for her sensuality and the way she had treated her husband. The young man could not withstand this and relieved the landlady from the clutches of the relatives. Mrs. Lusty was in her forties and had lived with her husband for many years; shortly after the funeral, when the relatives had departed, the landlady tried to seduce the young man. She wanted the young man to slip into the shoes of the landlord. One could not have expected her to misbehave at this juncture. It was quite odd and abnormal. The young man searched for completeness and truth. He was not completely trapped by his own nature. He had the capacity to dominate it. He came to a realization that flesh is not the answer for the crisis and one must inter-relate the factors that were represented by the landlady and the landlord. That is physical sensuousness and truth searching intellect.

In *TheHam Funeral*, there are only three major characters in the play. The writer concentrated only on the inner life of an individual. In the next play *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, White's changed his attention to the Australian society. The depiction demanded wider representation. In the list of the dramatis personae, there are three couples, the Pogsons, the Knotts and the Ernies. The Pogsons and the Knots represented the stereotypical middle class family who conform to the norms of the society. Their main interest at heart was to bring up their children in a disciplined way. The Boyles struck a contrast with other two couples. Nola Boyle belonged to the group of women characters of Patrick White, who were in 'dangerous forties'. While introducing her, White addressed her as lioness. Lionesses are especially popular

for hunting. They look very different from male lions, and it is the lioness that does the hunting most, so the adjective lioness emphasized both femininity and ferocity. Nola was introduced, when Pippy, the younger daughter of the Pogsons, talked about dogs in the opening scene with Deedree, a friend of Pippy. Whenever Pippy continued to share her ideas about the dogs, further information and activities of Nola were informed through the stage direction. The real purpose of the animal motif in literature is to underline a theme, or make a statement about a certain character. Animals are used to depict characters more often than they describe themes. White had a specific instruction to the audience. He tried to correlate some aspects of Nola with the dogs, which would be expounded as the play progresses.

Her husband Ernie Boyle was also in forties. He was very active. He was agreeable, innocent and generous. When compared with the head of other two families, he was from a low social position. Mr. Clive Pogson and Harry Knot were executives while, Boyle was a night soil man. Ernie worked during nights and returned home in the morning. When he entered, other men left for work. In spite of the difference in their social ladder, all the three families lived in the same lane. The entire plot revolved around the day to day happenings that took place in these houses.

Rowley Masson was another important character in the play. He was a friend of Ernie Boyle. During the World War, both of them worked together in the army. He was addressed as 'digger' Masson by Ernie. He felt proud to be addressed so. "Ernie (calling): A good mate of mine. Rowley Masson. 'Digger' Masson. We was together in the Western Desert." (S.A.S. 1.1.97). The term "digger" was widely used in Australasia, to mean a miner. Later, it was applied to the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. The troops were especially, good at digging tunnels between their own trenches and the enemies and were regarded by both sides as diggers. The job of digging between the trenches was very hard. The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps members considered it as a compliment to be referred to as diggers, since it indicated that they were good at a very difficult job. After the war, Ernie was settled with Nola Boyle. The case was different with Rowley Masson. He was still not settled. "Ernie:.. . Mind you, I don't think Rowley ever sticks at anything for long. You'll like 'im, though. I told 'im to look in and see us." (S.A.S. 1.1.97)

Ernie, one day, met his old mate, Rowley Mason and invited him. Rowley was expected any time. Nola was not happy over the issue: "Nola: Some dirty, no-hope truck-driver! I don't see why you're gonna let 'im bludge on us!" (S.A.S. 1.1.97). As they continued with their discussion, reference had been made to Nola's erstwhile lover Stan. There arose a feud between Nola and Ernie. Nola accused Ernie of being jealous about a lot of silly things that happened a long time ago. Finally, they arrived at a compromise. Already Nola had been associated with the qualities of animal. At this juncture, a new man was about to arrive. It was really going to be an acid test for Nola's personality. J.R. Dyce in *Patrick White as Playwright* rightly pointed out:

Nola has already been identified with the animal motif of the play, so that the proposed visit of one Rowley Masson, Ern's mate from the Western Desert could prove inopportune, a fact later to be confirmed in her spoken reverie. (48)

Ernie Boyle had confidence in his mate Rowley Masson and in his wife Nola Boyle and allowed his mate to stay in his house, when he was away for his work. Nola was not happy with her husband's decision. She wished that her husband had not made his mate to stay at their

home. She was very blunt in her perception to sex. She never minded about the so called sophisticated and refrained manners and called a bitch a bitch. She kept her glands under control on the first day. But, on the next day Rowley Masson having understood the nature of Nola, trapped and seduced her and made his friend a cuckold.

Night on Bald Mountain is the fourth play written by Patrick White. Professor Sword is one of the leading characters. He considered that giving a vent to one's own sexual feeling was a sin. So, he stifled his sexual instinct. In this process, he made his wife, Miriam Sword, to suffer. She was about forty-five years old. Her face lacked colour and warmth. Her ravaged face exhibited a glimpse of beauty. Her eyes were very vague and dull. Her hair and the dress were untidy. She suffered from nervousness. Professor Sword locked her in a lonely house that was available in the bald mountain. In the words of May Brit Akerholt in *Patrick White*, "Samson's sex life is restrained; Miss Quodling keeps her animals fenced and their horns burnt, just as Sword keeps Miriam in her room and his own instincts and passions buried within himself." (109) Unfortunately, Sword was attracted towards Stella, the nurse, who was of his daughter's age. He prayed and tried his best to control his feelings towards Stella. If he had respected his and his wife's feeling and had led a normal family life, he would have been in a safer side. His pent up emotions waited in him for a long time for an outlet. As he stifled his instinct, his feelings got perverted and resulted in the seduction of Stella. May Brit Akerholt as rightly pointed out in her book *Patrick White* as:

Miriam Sword, a former beauty, is now an 'invalid', a "dyed-in-the-wool dipso" (p 275), locked away by her husband who himself is hiding from his dried-up intellect and suppressed physical drives. Through suppression of instincts, physical and spiritual, they destroy life in themselves and in the people around them. (100)

Not only in Patrick White's plays, but in his novels also the theme of eccentricity in man-woman relationship and abnormality in sex is portrayed. In *Night, The Prowler*, Felicity Bannister is the only child of Doris and Humphrey Bannister. She was in her mid-twenties. They lived together in a large, beautiful home in a middle class suburb of Sydney. Late one night, Doris and Humphrey were awakened by the frightful screams of their daughter. As they both arrived downstairs, they were confronted by a distraught Felicity who told them she had been molested by a prowler.

A Fringe of Leaves is a historical novel. The story is based on that of Eliza Fraser, who in 1836 was shipwrecked on a reef, off the Queensland coast. Ellen Roxburgh is the heroine of the novel. She was the only survivor and had spent six months, totally naked, with the aboriginal tribe that saved her. Patrick White's another novel, *Happy Valley* explores a married doctor's love affair with a music teacher. In other novels the themes of homosexuality and transvestism are only touched upon. But, in *The Twyborn Affair*, they come into focus for the first time. The novel is divided into three parts. In each of the three parts of the novel the main character appeared in different guises. In the first, he was Eudoxia, 'wife' of a Greek. In the last, he was Eadith Trist, the keeper of a fashionable London brothel. Only in the middle section, he appeared vaguely as himself, as Eddie Twyborn. The central character, Eddie/ Eudoxia/ Eadith Twyborn, had a male body but a female consciousness. He was in his search for identity. He used various external disguises, which confused the reader. In one section, he appeared as a young wartime hero, in another, he assumed the part of a brothel keeper. He failed to find fulfillment and true sexual identity, either as a man or as a woman. But, he learnt to value friendship and the

importance of recognizing the woman in man and the man in woman. The novel can be read as an enquiry into bisexuality.

It is natural for a writer to infuse certain traits of his own, while creating a character. It is also quite obvious that these characters reflect the attitudes towards life, men and matter, which resemble that of the writer. Real life experience can help in shaping either directly or indirectly an author's work. Hence, biographical approach began with the simple understanding that literature was written by actual people and that understanding an author's life could help readers more thoroughly to comprehend the work. In the essay "Criticism and Psychology" Wilfred Guerin rightly pointed out that:

One could take the biography of a writer, as illustrated by the external events of his life and by such things as letters and other confessional documents, and construct out of these a theory of the writer's personality – his conflicts, frustrations, traumatic experiences neuroses, or whatever they happened to be and use this theory in order to illuminate each one of his works. (334)

An understanding about Patrick White's life and his parents' attitude will facilitate us to have a very clear idea about the characters of Alma and Will Lusty. Patrick White was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. His parents were members of the wealthy Hunter Valley grazier society of New South Wales. His father was a polite gentleman. His mother Ruth was not so. She was greedy and ambitious. Patrick White had a kind of aversion towards her mother for those qualities. He had created many women characters on the model of his mother. In an introduction to Patrick White's life in the online encyclopedia glbtq - gay, lesbian, bisexual transgender and queer culture - it is commented that:

Whereas his father was quiet and mild-mannered, his mother Ruth was socially ambitious, a determined woman whose predatory qualities both fascinated and horrified her son. He was to remark that a good many of the intimidating women characters of his novels were modeled from his mother, with whom he carried on a lifelong feud.

The eccentricity and abnormality in the treatment of sex and man-woman relationship in Patrick White's work and the main reason for that could also be traced in the biography of Patrick White. White himself personally had abnormal sexual relationship. He was not married. He proved to be a homosexual. White spent much of his life time in England and Europe until he was thirty-three. He had his schooling in Cheltenham, an English public school. He experienced humiliation there, as a colonial and a homosexual. After leaving university, he lived for some years in London, mixing with artists and actors and experienced a number of homosexual liaisons. It was in North Africa and in Greece that, his mature life started. He was part of a British Army Intelligence Unit, when he met the soldier ManolyLascaris. Lascaris became his lover and lifelong companion. They set up household in New South Wales at the end of World War II and were together when White died.

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