

ROMANTICISM IN PATRICK WHITE'S VOSS

Dr. Rachana
Guest Faculty
Department of English
Bundelkhand University,
Jhansi (U.P.)

Romanticism was an ideological and artistic movement that replaced Classicism in the nineteenth century. It stressed the freedom of individual self-expression and twined towards emotion, inspiration, spontaneity and originality as against the Augustan principles of mechanical, impersonal, artificial rationality. As an artistic method it expresses the artist's attitude to the depicted phenomena, which in a way elevates his/ her work and gives it some emotional colouring. Frederich Schegel is often considered to be the first person to use the term *romantisch* in literary contexts. His brother August W. Schegel, implied that romantic literature was in contrast to classical literature. Many people believe that his movement originated in England but the seeds of this movement were sown in Germany as far back as in the eighteenth century. However, in eighteenth century England, a discernible shift had already begun to take place in sensibility and feeling, particularly in relation to the natural order and Nature. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron were the chief exponents of the Romantic Movement in England.

Romanticism is an increasing interest in Nature and in the Natural, primitive and uncivilized way of life, a growing interest in scenery, specially its more untamed and disorderly manifestations, an association of human moods with the 'moods' of nature- and thus a subjective feeling for and interpretation of it, a considerable emphasis on Natural religion emphasis on the need for spontaneity in thought, action and in the expression of thought increasing importance attached to natural genius and the power of the imagination, a tendency to exalt the individual and his / her needs and emphasize on the need for a free and more personal expression the cult of the Noble Savage. Most romantic poets considered themselves to be free spirits expressing their own imaginative truth. Romanticism attaches great importance to the individual and the subjective dimension of the human experience. Rene Welleck has defined Romanticism as "a compound of a particular view of imagination, a particular attitude to nature and a particular writing style". The other characteristics of Romanticism include a reaction against tradition, the importance of nature and country life, escape to the middle ages, liberation of the ego, spontaneity, love of the supernatural and a revival of lyricism.

Romanticism as a distinct form of ideology essentialises strangeness and enchantment. Romanticism is in fact a quality of mind; and this is largely prompted either by the advent of a new philosophical mode or by an epoch-making event. British Romanticism was fortunate to be aided by both of these critical components: German Transcendentalism and the French Revolution. Australian literature was not fortunate enough to be nurtured by any of these critical factors. Moreover, by the time Patrick White began writing his novels; Europe was groping under the shadow of the World Wars. Again when *Voss* was written in 1957, Europe was experimenting with different forms dealing with such ideological proliferations as the Angry Young Man Movement, Dadaism, Existentialism, and so on. Notably Romantic Europe outgrew

the ecstasy of romanticism. White's romanticism lies embedded in the growing consciousness of Australian individualism. While Europe was busy with Intellectualizing its inward despair, Australia was gradually trying to substantiate its own identity apart from other places. In the domain of literature, the Jindiworobak

Romantic Movement is a distinct sign of Australia's search for individualism and identity. The history of Australia is a history of the repeated attempts at coming to terms with the land. But in doing so, they began to discover a quality of strangeness and enchantment in the land. This sense of romanticism was earlier echoed in AD Hope's sustained statement of deep romanticism:

They call her a young country, but they lie,
She is the last of lands . . .

The idea of the journey has always been a distinctive romantic component. The romantic predisposition with the idea of journey has also generated a sense of symbolic quest. This romantic and symbolic quest *may* be traced back to Homer's *Odyssey* that exhibits a sense of symbolic suffering. In the course of ten years' long journey Odysseus travels through many unknown lands and passes through many strange experiences. But there is also a hidden sense of romanticism because the entire journey is a progress towards his reunion with his wife and son in Ithaca.

Again in Dante's *Divine Commedia*, there is a symbolic spiritual journey. British literature is also packed to the fiddle with such journey motifs. *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Tom Jones*, *A Sentimental Journey*, *Heart of Darkness* are some significant and pertinent examples. In all these creative works, the romantic and the symbolic traditions are vigorously at work. Patrick White's *Voss* also projects an exploratory journey in which the spirit of romanticism is largely associated with the discovery of sublime strangeness. If it had been merely an exploration of the physical topography of the land, it would be nothing short of a travelogue. It is true that *Voss* presents a long journey through the arid topography of Australia. But Patrick White never intends to generate a geographical awareness of the land. He instead tries to make the readers intensely aware of the ecstatic romanticism growing out of the multiple emotions created by the mysticatlity of the land. The idea of journey projected in the novel is essentially experiential in character. In fact the progress though the land is a journey into one's own self. It is a kind of self discovery. In New South Wales Voss comes to know the settlers - the small world of Mr. Bonner and other settlers forming an Australian microcosm. Voss encounters a mimetic version of the motherland the settlers have left behind. There is also a curious interweaving of the convict past projected in terms of some of the settlers.

The first stage of Voss's journey takes the party by sea to Newcastle and overland through the gentle, healing landscape of the Hunter to Rhine Towers ... Rhine Towers in the care of the Sandersons - is a place of simplicity and perfection, an Eden in the bush . . . Voss leads the party from that sublime valley across New England to the flat coolabahs country... Jildra is the last outpost before the wilderness. West of Jildra lies the desert. Once the expedition left Jildra, Voss was on an expedition to the outer limits of his imagination," (*Patrick White; A Life, 124*)

It is a linear progressive journey that gradually leads us to the strange romantic interior of the land. The more they progress into the land, the more they unlearn the normative customs and designs of life. As they go beyond the traditional frontiers of human existence, they are confronted with an arid, cruel nature. Exposed to the primal intensity of nature, they begin to perceive the perennial instincts of the land. Moreover there is a curious sub-text of the conflict

between the whites and the Aborigines. The aborigines appear as the human agents of the primal simplicity of nature itself the explorers are considered to be aliens disturbing the mystic innocence of the land. The loss of the compass seems to be extremely symbolic of a subversion of the civilized artifice of the settlers. Let us now examine the elements of love in the novel.

The element of love is also another significant component of the theme of romanticism. This specific emotional aspect of the novel may be located in the relation between Laura and Voss. White wrote,

I wanted to write a story of a grand passion - don't jump. So this is at the same time the story of a girl called Laura Trevelyan, the niece of a Sydney merchant, one of the patrons of Voss's expedition. It is different from other grand passions in that it grows in the minds of the two people concerned more through the stimulus of their surroundings and through almost irrelevant incidents. Voss and Laura only meet three or four times before the expedition sets out. They even find each other partly antipathetic. Yet, Voss writes proposing to the girl on one of the early stages of the journey, partly out of vanity, and partly because he realises he is already lost; she accepts, partly out of a desire to save him from his delusions of divinity; partly out of a longing for religious faith, to which she feels she can only return to through love.. (*Patrick White; A Life, 7*)

But the idea of love is not realised in the context of any direct involvement. Love is considered essentially as a spiritual experience. In the primary chapters of the novel, their relationship may be regarded as a kind of deep attachment. Laura seems to try to understand the intensity and the depth of Voss's emotional involvement in the exploration. Voss also seems to be touched by her sympathy and kindness. But it is not really possible to locate the element of love during this phase. In fact it is through their absence that they begin to discover the intense workings of the emotions of love. In other words, the idea of love is more a psychic experience than a concrete mode of physical realisation. Patrick White has tried to create a tension between the levels of abstraction and concretization in the context of love. In the beginning of the novel, we come across an emphasis on the concrete level of love.

But as the novel progresses and Voss leaves on his mission of exploration, both of them begin to experience an emotional attachment at the level of abstraction. This psychic intensity of love gradually conduces to deep feelings of love. They begin to undergo strange visionary experiences.

Or she closed her eyes, and they rode northward together between the small hills, some green and soft, with the feathers of young corn refined on their sides, others hard and blue as sapphires. As the two visionaries rode, their teeth were shivering, flashing, for their faces anonymous with love, was turned naturally towards each other, and they did from time to time, catch such irrelevantly personal glimpses. What they were saying had not yet been translated but of the air, the rustling of the corn, and the resilient cries of the Romantic birds. (*Voss, 13*)

These abstract experiences create hallucinatory reactions.

So he rode through hell, until he felt her touch him. I shall not fail you' said Laura Trevelyan. Even if there are times when you wish me to, I shall not fail you. He would not look at her, however, for he was not yet ready.. .

You are not in possession of your faculties,' he said to her at last. 'What are my faculties?' she asked.

Then they were drifting together. They were sharing the same hell, in their common flesh, which he had attempted so often to repudiate. She was fitting him with a sheath of tender white.(chapter-14, *Voss*)

But Voss does not come back in the end.

As the two characters are separated by events and distances, their stories have to be developed alternatively, but they also fuse, in dreams, in memories and in delirium - most closely, for instance, when Voss is lying half-dead of thirst and starvation, and Laura is suffering from delusions as a result of a psychic disturbance diagnosed as the inevitable "brain fever". Voss is finally dragged through the dust, and accepts the principles Laura would have liked him to accept before he is murdered by the blacks. Laura recovers. She becomes a headmistress and a figure of some respect in the community, if also one that nobody really understands, because of some mysterious past.(*Patrick white; A life*, 314)

Despite the tragic end of Voss, Laura does not behave like a suffering woman. In fact the idea of love has been sublimated in terms of the role Voss plays as a maker of history. The personal history of their love comes to be subsumed by the assertion of public history. Patrick White has used all the traditional components of love story- feelings of attachment, absence, suffering, love's unhappiness and so on. But White has never lost sight of the essential theme of the novel. He has therefore created an interweaving of the theme of love and that of exploration. These two themes have been splendidly assimilated to form a unified design. Thus the projection of love in this novel has finally substantiated a greater theme-the Australian history that Voss cannot die because he has become part of history through his exploration of this strange land. There is romantic landscape also.

In the beginning of the novel, we are placed in the urban settlement of New South Wales. It is a world that still clings to the memories of the original homeland. But gradually they are building up the settlement. It is a world that is slowly growing up. Mr. Bonner proudly proclaims how they are establishing the country. But in this way they are also destroying the native purity of the country. Their association with nature is limited to their occasional going out for a picnic. When the explorers cross Jildra, we begin to experience a distinctive change in the topography. The urban world of New South Wales comes to be replaced by a primitive, un-trodden landscape. Here human beings seem to be unprivileged, helpless creatures exposed to the sublime passivity of nature. It is a landscape where we notice an absence of man-made artifice. The explorers aided by their horses and the compass, seem to be paltry and sordid. The macrocosmic nature projected through its vast stretches of sand, stones and rivers creates a feeling of awe. There are also two different kinds of landscape associated with two contrasted sets of people. New South Wales is the world of the civilised whites, while the unexplored interior of the Australian landscape fits in well with the native Aborigines. In other words, New South Wales represents artificiality and restraint, whereas the primitive topography symbolises, simplicity and sublimity.

This landscape generates multiple reactions among the explorers. As long as they are limited to the civilised landscape, they adhere to the urban code of discipline, order and restraint. But as they enter the macrocosmic world of Australian landscape, confusion and division gradually set in. Old Dugald is the first to underline this sense of division. He goes back to his

own people (the Aborigines), thereby suggesting an antithesis between the Whites and the Aborigines. Voss' leadership is also questioned and a visible rift takes place in the party of the explorers. Perhaps the sublime vastness of the landscape creates an unbearable pressure on all of them. The uninhibited spontaneity of the landscape gives them a release from the long-cherished notions of discipline and restraint. Confusion finally leads to the death of all the explorers. They do not return to the urban world of New South Wales. It is through their death that they are consumed into the sublime landscape of the interior of Australia. Like the Greek philosopher Empedocles, they finally die, but they die with cognition and knowledge.

The world of Voss is a world of strange discovery. He is a German explorer who has come away from his homeland in order to discover the strange primitiveness of the interior of Australia. Thus sitting at the house of Mr. Bonner, he remembers how he wavered between different ambitions. His father was a timber merchant and his mother was a sentimental woman. At first it was decided that he would become a great surgeon, but he was revolted by the palpitating bodies of men. Then it was thought that he would become a botanist. But finally he leaves Germany to become an explorer. But what does really bring him to Australia?

Australia perhaps became a strange icon for him - an icon representing romantic obsession. Thus the stereotyped careers of a surgeon or a botanist do not really satisfy him. He wants to work out a new kind of future. He says to Laura: "Your future is what you will make of it. Future is will" (Chapter 3). It is because of this emphasis on his personal will that he stands apart from the others. This naturally conduces to misunderstanding and miscomprehension: "Some pitied him. Some despised him for his funny appearance of a foreigner. None, he realized with a tremor of anger, was conscious of his strength. Mediocre, animal men never do guess at the power of rock of fire, until the last moment before those elements reduce them to ... nothing" (Chapter 3).

This demarcation may be explained only in terms of the specific mindset of Voss. Even though Voss seems to have planned the exploration of the Australian continent, yet he is actually interested in discovering the essential soul of Australia. Voss's quest is in fact a metaphysical quest emphasizing the mystical infiniteness of the land. Through continuous settlement, the world of gods is gradually becoming the world of men. But Voss intends to move beyond the limited frontiers of concrete experientialism. He remains absorbed in a world of his own. Even though he travels with his other team members, he is emotionally distant from them. He begins to be identified with this strange world of vast natural perspective. When some of his group members leave him, he does not really consider himself alone. Loneliness is actually a state of mind. But Voss seems to have annihilated this sense of loneliness Romantic through his metaphysical consciousnesses of probing deep into the *eternal* infinity of the Australian world. When the Aborigines through the treachery of Jackie finally capture Voss, he does not lose his faith in the powers of the innate goodness of man. Voss again and again tries to annihilate the barrier between the whites and the Aborigines. The Aborigines consider themselves as truly belonging to the land and as such they find themselves separated from the settlers. But Voss says to Jackie: "Where do I belong, if not here? Tell your people we are necessary to one another."

When Voss finally awaits death at the hand of the Aborigines, he seems to undergo a strange mystic experience. He suddenly begins to visualise his release from the prospective violence and despair. Before his death, he has a dream that seems to offer a sudden possibility of emancipation. He visualises himself riding away from his past: "Once he had ridden away, he did not look back at the past, so great was his confidence in the future" (Voss, 113). But even in his death, he is merged into the land. His blood goes deep into the mystic land and he becomes,

through his death, a part of the mystic land: "His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out upon the dry *earth*, which drank it up immediately. Whether dreams breed, or the earth responds to a pint of blood, the instant of death does not tell" (Chapter 13). Voss's death may be considered as an icon of the Australian dream. Voss's journey is therefore a distinctive paradigm of the mystic discovery of the interior of Australia.

Voss is a specific romantic icon. His journey is therefore a romantic quest. In other words, it becomes a progress towards the unknowable. Moreover Laura becomes romantically inclined to the spirit of enchantment generated by this element of strange quest. Again the frequent alternation between New South Wales and the mystical interior of Australia creates a constant shift of focus. Thus throughout the novel, we notice a significant opposition between the level of reality and that of romanticism.

Works Cited

Bruce Bennett & Jennifer Strauss: *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, Oxford University Press, 1998, Print.

Veronica Brady: "Patrick White and the Difficult God" in *a Crucible of Prophets*, Sydney, (1981)

David Marr: *Patrick White; A Life*, Victoria: Random Century, 1991, Print.

V. Chatterjee : *Journal of Australian Literature*, Vol. 1; no. 1, June, 1990

William Walsh: "*Patrick White's Fiction*," Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1977.