

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

I

Our study of the five women protagonists in Patrick White's novels clearly indicates the centrality of Woman in White's fictional world. The question why Patrick White is interested in exploring human life and human relationships in terms of feminine consciousness and feminine experience is not pertinent to a critic, though they may be of interest to a biographer or a psychoanalyst. David Tacey, a psychoanalyst-critic, refers to Patrick White's honest identification of himself as essentially homosexual in his Flaws in the Glass and says that 'the choice of a female protagonist has the ...advantage of catering to the author's own 'ambivalence'...' ¹ But Patrick White, in the same book, says that he is essentially a writer, a creative mind : "I see myself not so much a homosexual as a mind possessed by the spirit of man or woman according to actual situations or the characters I become in my writing." ² What is, therefore, relevant to a critic is the way Patrick White depicts his women protagonists and what he tries to convey through them in terms of his spiritual and ethical concerns. My dissertation has been a modest attempt at examining the protagonists as they are presented in their concreteness and at suggesting, taking into account what the critics have already said, their uniqueness in the modes of their existence. We have seen that White never creates a stereotype of a woman protagonist, each of them

being a unique person facing a unique situation, and this forbids generalisations, except the most obvious ones like, say, all his women characters are flawed. When such a question was asked, White said, “Of course my women are flawed because they are all human beings, as I am, which is why [I write my books]...”³ Carolyn Bliss reads in this remark of White’s some clue to his creativity. “The implication is that,” Bliss says, “in part at least, he wrote to delineate his own fears and failings....and sought humility through his characters.”⁴ This interpretation of an innocent remark is not, I think, warranted. It is true that the author’s concerns are inevitably reflected in the shaping of his characters and in the designing of his plots, and it is the business of criticism to discover these concerns in the texts themselves.

When we look at all the five women characters together, we find two of them, Amy Parker and Ellen Roxburgh, are ordinary characters coming from peasant stocks, one Australian and the other British. Amy sticks to one place and has a comparatively normal family life, whereas Ellen goes places and suffers from a number of dissociations. Both commit adultery - Amy out of romantic curiosity, and Ellen out of sexual frustration. Ellen encounters most unusual situations like a shipwreck and living with the aborigines. Both have healthy commonsense and zest for life, and both attain wisdom through their experiences. Both are not religious : Amy learns to accept her limitation in responding to religion, Ellen has an awareness of God’s grace in Pilcher’s

chapel. As a character, Ellen is far more interesting than Amy because of the variety and the awfulness of her experiences.

In the case of Theodora Goodman and Laura Trevelyan, both of whom are extraordinary characters, White takes recourse to abnormal psychology in depicting them. Theodora suffers from schizophrenia and Laura is mentally ill, when she has telepathic connection with Voss, her fantasy-lover, until he dies. Theodora is at peace with herself only when her fantasy-mentor, Holstius, asks her to accept the two irreconcilable halves of herself. Both are, in fact spinsters, though Laura is platonically married in the mind. Theodora's lucid self achieves a superior wisdom, though her lunatic self takes her to a madhouse. Both Theodora and Laura are rebels, the former a passive rebel and the latter active: they rebel against the Australian bourgeoisie who lead a superficial materialistic kind of life, a life impervious to spiritual values. Theodora's life becomes fragmented because of her suppressed agonies, whereas Laura falls in love with the megalomaniac Voss and becomes very active and creative : For instance, she volunteers to see Rose through her illegitimate pregnancy and later, when Rose dies, she adopts her daughter, Mercy. If Theodora leaves Australia and goes abroad 'to see', Laura, an English girl, adopts Australia as her own country, thanks to Voss's martyrdom.

It is Elizabeth Hunter who stands by herself. She is old and dying, unlike all the other women protagonists who are young or middle-aged. Even at the point of death she tries to live intensely in her relationships with her

three nurses and a housekeeper, whom she holds to herself with the power of her will and the strategies of affection. This egotistical woman has had a mystical experience, which has given her a source of redemption. She has two apparently successful children, Dorothy and Basil who are hollow inside and corrupt. Elizabeth is depicted with compassionate humour, the comedy reaching its climax in her death on the commode. Elizabeth is one the most unique characters White has created in a style which is a blend of the sacred and the profane, the comic and the serious.

The point that the dissertation proves is that each woman protagonist is unique, one different from the other, though we find superficial similarities in some characters. Each has her own life-pattern and her destiny, which she shapes under the pressure of her circumstances. The greatness of Patrick White is that he creates each character out of a central seed of individual personality which unfolds itself organically into a rounded figure. His ethical, spiritual, religious and sociological concerns are unobtrusively blended into the characters.

II

First, let us see what Australian experience emerges from the study of the five women protagonists. Patrick White, who belongs to the third phase - the modern phase - of the development of Australian fiction, believes in

blending the European influences with the native Australian urges to produce, as G.A.Wilkes says, 'a literature that is both distinctive and mature.' ⁵

The European influences are obvious. Patrick White has behind him the entire European tradition - the tradition of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Dickens, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and so on. The influence of Dostoevsky, for instance, is seen in The Aunt's Story, in its Parts Two and Three, where the abnormal minds are plumbed in depth. The Tree of Man has in it the Lawrentian method of characterisation. The Eye of the Storm is 'a comic epic in prose' and it has Dickensian characters in it. Voss and A Fringe of Leaves are, in a way, purely Whitean novels, though it is possible to find some Conradian elements in them. What is of significance is the distinctive Australian experience that has gone into these novels and, particularly, into the women protagonists.

In The Aunt's Story Patrick White takes a countryside girl, sensitive and imaginative, who leaves Meroe and goes to Sydney, and later to Europe and America. Theodora Goodman sits in judgement on the bourgeois society of the Australian countryside, of which her mother and her sister Fanny are the best representatives. It is significant that this society of superficial materialistic values is always described in satirical terms. This is a society which makes people like Mr. George Goodman and his erstwhile mate, The Man who was Given his Dinner, who are really men with sensitivity and vision, total outsiders. Similarly, her mother's Sydney life and Mr. Clarkson the solicitor's

material intentions are ridiculed in the novel. As Geoffrey Dutton says, "She finds no pity in the hard stones of Australia, no sanity in the Europe of the late 1930s."⁶ We find similar criticism of the Sydney bourgeoisie in Voss, where Laura Trevelyan revolts against the Bonners and the Pringles. Laura goes to the extent of becoming a rationalist and an atheist and avoiding going to church on Sundays. It is through her relationship with Voss that she learns to pray and to act with Christian charity, and later finds in Voss a little of Christ. Laura comes to love Australia, not in terms of the maps, but in terms of the spirit of adventure and the sense of mystery it inspires. In Elizabeth Hunter we have a picture of the egotism that Australian bourgeoisie generates, but it is Australian nature in the form of a terrible storm and an awful loneliness that gives her a redeeming experience. Her children, on the other hand, go abroad because of their wealth, and become alien to Australia, and consequently rootless and corrupt.

In A Fringe of Leaves we have in Ellen Roxburgh an English woman encountering the Australian reality. First, she has to encounter her brother-in-law, Garnet, the wild young Englishman with criminal tendencies, making for himself an affluent life by devious means. Hobart Town itself is a penal colony, where the convicts are suitably employed and subdued by the authorities. The wild Australian landscape arouses Ellen's suppressed passions and she falls a victim to Garnet's wildness. And then she enters a world of the aborigines after the shipwreck. Her husband, Austin Roxburgh, is killed by the

aborigines immediately after they manage to land on the island. She even lives the life of the tribe in accordance with their mores, by becoming even a cannibal for some time. In Voss, too, we have the forbidding Australian landscape, its bushes and deserts, and we have a glimpse of the Aboriginal activities which include the killing of Voss. In A Fringe of Leaves we have the full tribal life realised with sympathy and insight. We have also a phenomenon of a convict sentenced to life sentence fleeing from Australian penal colony and joining a tribe and seeking freedom in a savage society. The depiction of the tribal life is a testimony to Patrick White's compassion through which he sees the essential humanity in the Aborigines. Ellen Roxburgh realises this common humanity and accepts their cultural mores and their religion with openness of mind.

It is in The Tree of Man that Patrick White really celebrates the life of the early settlers, the pioneers, who took upon themselves the mission of cultivating the land and building the first villages and towns within the framework of Christian values. Stan Parker is, primarily, married to Nature and, secondarily, to Amy, his Eve. Amy is alienated from Stan's religious world, but without her practicality and earthiness Stan would be nowhere near his fulfilment. But the irony is that their son goes astray and, in the shady regions of city life like thieving and gambling, he gets brutally killed. And their daughter gets into a complacent and materialistic bourgeois society without any spiritual values. Patrick White has great faith in the ordinary

people who, with their vitality and healthy earthiness, they are the stuff out of which Australia has been brought into being. White holds the Euro-centric educated people to ridicule. Elizabeth Hunter's son, Basil, and daughter, Dorothy, who have found success in Europe, are aliens in Australia, but they are hollow within and corrupt. White shows the depth of their inner corruption in terms of their incestuous relationship in their parents' bed at Kudjeri.

III

Our study shows that White's women protagonists are often the vehicles of Patrick White's vision of human life, a vision not crystallized into something clear-cut and definite, but a vision with fuzzy contours. It is good to bear in mind about what White himself says about what he believes: "What do I believe? I am accused of not making it explicit. How to be explicit about an overwhelming grandeur...A gust of wind. A flower opening....Am I a destroyer? This face in the glass which spent a lifetime searching for what it believes, but can never prove the truth. A face consumed by wondering whether truth can be the worst destroyer of all." 7

But, in spite of what White says, I think, it is possible to try and indicate some of his concerns, predilections and attitudes as reflected in the characterisation of his women protagonists. We may categorise the vision in Lawrentian terms of four kinds of relationships : Man and the Beyond, Man and Nature, Man and Society, and Man and Woman.

Let us take the first relationship first.. The 'Beyond' may be thought of as Religion or Mysticism, which is the Beyond inside the human mind.

Theodora Goodman, for instance, is not interested in religion at all, but in her inner world, To begin with it is Nature which gives her some solace. But later it is her own imagination she has to rely on. In Part III she has a mystical experience in terms of the figure of Holstius, shaped out of the depths of her mind, who, like a Guru, speaks to her of acceptance. In Holstius's words we may find some of the ideas that Patrick White was seriously toying with in the late forties:

"You cannot reconcile joy and sorrow...or flesh and marble, or illusion and reality, or life and death. For this reason...you must accept....There is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality." ⁸

This comes very near the concept of 'maya' found in Hindu philosophy.

Theodora's idea of 'many lives' also is Hindu in essence.

Amy, like Theodora, is also without religion. But she does not have, unlike Theodora, a desire to 'see' through things. To her, Christ is but an old man spitting death and the church is just a place where beautiful words are uttered, She is a pagan with the pagan's love of sensual pleasures. She does not suffer from a terrible sense of guilt when she commits adultery, and at the Communion she finally realises that she can never understand the transcendence that Stan enjoys. White shows a lot of genuine respect for Stan's instinctive faith in God and his mystical relationship with Nature. When Stan

speaks of a gob of spittle as God, he is not giving a Christian concept of God, but a pantheistic or a Hindu concept of all pervading Brahman.

Laura Trevelyan is an agnostic and a rationalist, to begin with. But through her suffering with and for Voss, she learns to pray and, later she recognises the Christ in him, which element has helped him to overcome the Devil in him. Ellen Roxburgh is also not a religious person, but towards the end when all the trials are over, she becomes aware of the grace of God. Elizabeth Hunter, too, does not show any evidence of being religious, but she has something like a real mystical experience in the eye of the storm. This experience becomes a regenerative centre in her consciousness which lends significance to her later life till her death. During that experience of great joy, she feels that the desire to possess has left her and that the jewel of light exists only by grace.

On the whole, we get a feeling that White does not have belief in organised religion and the traditional concept of God. But he does believe in the moments of mystical illumination which irradiates life and lends it significance. But he does not seem to believe in a disciplined life of purity to experience the purity of being. Even a sinful person like Elizabeth Hunter can be blessed with a transcendent vision.

Nature is a great regenerative force in almost all the novels we have considered. Theodora gets her spiritual sustenance from Nature whenever she feels humiliated or lost. At Meroe she has her rose-garden and the mountains;

at school, she has her green hawthorne tree; at Sydney she has her bay; and at Jardin Exotique she has her 'untouchable' garden (p.140), which always gives her peace of mind. Then in America, vast fields of trumpeting corn give her a call that could not be denied, and it is the lovely hills that give her moment of mystical experience, when Holstius, her fantasy-mentor, appears before her. David Tacey says, "Nature is the archetypal force wherever she happens to be."⁹

In The Tree of Man Nature reigns supreme. As David Tacey says, "Stan Parker enjoys an ecstatic communion with the Earth Mother... and when the Mother appears to him it is always in tyrannical outbursts of flood, fire or storm."¹⁰ Amy Parker, who is reconciled to ordinary, mild nature - for instance, she loves her garden and the rose-bush in it - she hates storms and rains. A flood or fire is but a disaster, which she can tolerate only as a change in the routine. In Voss, which is dominated by the characteristic Australian landscape of bushes and forests and deserts, Laura experiences this Australian wildness vicariously through her telepathic contact with the explorer.

Elizabeth Hunter, an egotistical society lady, has her transcendent moment in the solitude at the eye of a destructive storm. A Fringe of Leaves is also dominated by Nature, first the mild English nature of the Cornish farms, then the wild nature of the seas and Australia. The wild hills and rivers of Hobart Town arouse her hidden passions, and the shipwreck takes her to an island of forests and mangroves inhabited by the Aborigines. She is reduced to

a state of nature, when she clads herself in a fringe of leaves. Only then she understands the pattern of savage life which entirely depends on the vagaries and mercies of Nature. Thus all her terrible experiences take place in the matrix of Australian nature. Once she learns to survive them she becomes a better, wiser woman, well educated in the school of life.

The relationship between Man and Society is rarely explored in terms of urban life. In The Aunt's Story it is the countryside life that is depicted, and Theodora is the loneliest of all the characters that Patrick White has created. In fact, she rebels against both the country gentry and the Sydney middle class, and seeks deliberate solitude. But she believes in genuine relationship based on spiritual kinship. The only persons with whom she has any significant relationships are her father, her niece, and The Man Who was Given his Dinner. In Sydney she has a strange short-lived relationship with Moraitis, the Greek cellist. In Hotel du Midi, she develops tender relationships with General Sokolnikov, Katina and Alyosha Sergei, but she has already cultivated the vision of distance. In the American farm house, she has some fondness for the little boy, Zack. The most fruitful relationship she enjoys is with her fantasy-Guru, Holstius, a father-figure. On the whole, she hates society and flees from it into a world of schizophrenia.

The Tree of Man is about how the Australian societies grew and developed. Stan Parker, the pioneer, is not very much in need of society. He is a self-contained man, and he gets his fulfilment in living with Nature. Amy

Parker, on the other hand, craves for society. She is happy with her neighbours and the growing town with new and exciting human beings. Stan does not know how to bring up his children in a changing society, whereas Amy is overprotective, with the result Ray becomes wayward and indulges in criminal activities, and Thelma a victim of materialistic bourgeois society. Laura in Voss rebels against such a bourgeois society, the society of the Bonners and the Pringles, and has an unique kind of relationship with the German explorer, Voss. Even as a school-mistress, she is strict and rigid and lives by her own norms and not the norms of her society.

We get a full range of Australian bourgeoisie in The Eye of the Storm - a full-fledged society woman in Elizabeth Hunter, a shrewd solicitor in Arthur Wyburd, a wise house-keeper in Miss Lippmann, and three different types of nurses who belong to the lower middle class, and Europe-centered, rootless, children of Elizabeth who feel alien in their mother country. Patrick White cannot but use comedy to depict this society which he hates. The only thing he is lyrical about is Elizabeth's mystical experience in the eye of the storm, and he is appreciative of Elizabeth's later self-criticism and self-awareness.

In A Fringe of Leaves we come across many societies - the English class-ridden society, in which Ellen is transplanted from a peasant class into a cultured middle class, and then transferred to an Australian penal colony where the go-getters like Garnet Roxburgh make their fortunes, and then to the savage society of the Aborigines in which Ellen is suddenly thrown into. White seems

to have some sympathy for the peasant class, though he suggests that some people could be drunkards throwing the responsibilities of the family on the younger shoulders, even of daughters. The hold of the church is rather weak on this class. The educated middle class is rather wooden, uncreative in its complacency. The Australian penal colonies are heartless, treating the convicts in an inhuman way. There is a lot of immorality and reckless adventurism in this society. Compared to this society, the Aboriginal society looks more humane. White depicts this society with insight and empathy. He shows that the society treats Ellen with great courtesy and respect, and even promotes her to the level of the 'property' of the physician-conjurer, at which point she escapes. The tribal customs and traditions are effectively portrayed in such a way that their essential humanity is brought out.

The man-woman relationship is not a strong point with Patrick White. In The Aunt's Story Theodora's parents are not happy in their marriage. White shows that Mrs. Goodman has destroyed her husband with her insensitivity and materialism, and, similarly, hurts the sensibilities of her daughter whom she cannot understand. She makes Theodora a slave to serve her until her death. Frank and Fanny carry on with their married life in a kind of mutual apathy. Between them there are stretches of contempt 'broken by the bubbling moments of lust which are also called love'(p.257). Theodora does not dare have a relationship with any man. She has some kind of strange friendship with Mr. Clarkson, whose proposal of marriage she rejects. Apart from some

moments of fondness for Moraitis she has no intention of having any relationship with men. She is happy to be a spinster and an aunt.

Amy Parker has a happy relationship with her husband, though she cannot really get into his head and see what is there. She is a healthy compliment to her husband, who is absorbed totally in his farm work. Her earthiness and practicality lend solidity to Stan's piety and self-absorption which make him a little unworldly. When the hiatus widens after Stan returns from the War, which has broken something within him, Amy loses touch with Stan and, when an opportunity comes, commits adultery. But she returns to the norm quickly and becomes more devoted to Stan.

Laura-Voss relationship is unique, out of the earth, and Platonic. But their letters to each other which later never reach them speak of great tenderness and genuine love. That is why, their telepathic and empathetic relationship is credible to some extent. One wonders what dimension has been added to this Platonic relationship by keeping it totally non-physical.

Elizabeth Hunter, as a young society woman, marries Mr. Alfred Hunter for his wealth and property and destroys him, by leading a licentious life, even having an affair with the family solicitor, Mr. Wyburd. She is an utterly selfish and self-centered woman, whose incapacity to love is inherited by her two children. Basil and Dorothy, who, too, do not have a happy married life. They can only have short term affairs and marriages of convenience.

Ellen Roxburgh is also unhappy with her husband twenty years her senior and a weakling. She tries her best to be a good wife until she meets his robust and immoral brother Garnet who seduces her. She tries hard to come back to the norm, but after he is killed by the aborigines she feels liberated, though she keeps the wedding ring as a symbol of civilization. She luckily escapes being sexually exploited by the aborigines and later falls a prey to her white liberator, Jack Chance. Towards the end of the novel she accepts to marry a good-natured Englishman, primarily to get peace after a turbulent life. On the whole, White depicts most of the marriages and extra-marital relationships as destructive and unhelpful for spiritual fulfilment.

What, on the whole, Patrick White succeeds in creating are women of vibrant individuality and unbounded energy who face their situations in a manner which we might call heroic, and attain maturity and wisdom to face further living or death. No one is a perfect human being, but they all learn to accept their flaws and limitations. If Patrick White began with a protagonist who tries to find freedom and wisdom within herself, he moves on with women of greater openness of life and willingness to make mistakes, if need be, in their search for self-knowledge and integration. These women are not slaves to a tradition-bound social norms. They are ready to sever the bonds, if need be, and venture into unknown areas of experience or unknown countries of the mind. They are not religious in the traditional manner, but they have a religious commitment to life, and they are not seekers or seers in the traditional

manner, but in the process of living they are ready to receive any intimations of grace or messages of acceptance or realizations of human frailties. Patrick White calls The Aunt' Story 'a work which celebrates the human spirit.'¹¹ We may apply the same remark to all the other novels with women protagonists: They are all works which celebrate the human spirit.