

Chapter IV

THE EYE OF THE STORM : *Ambivalence of Redemption*

If, in the three novels that we have considered so far, we looked at women from their childhood or youth to old age, in The Eye of the Storm we have to look at an old woman, a mother, who is dying. In a sense, the novel is, as William Walsh says, 'a recreation of decrepitude and dying,'¹ but this process of dying is depicted with great insight and humour in a gorgeous style which Edgecombe calls "narrative pointillism,"² a style which handles simultaneously pathology, pathos and irony.

Elizabeth Hunter, the central protagonist, the pivot on which the entire novel revolves, is one of the most successful characters that Patrick White has created. The importance of this character is evident from what Whit wrote to Ingmar Bjorksten immediately after completing the novel : he believed that the novel had "come closer to giving the final answer."³ The final answer to what? To the mystery of life, perhaps. We have to be cautious, therefore, about jumping to simplistic conclusions like, say, "In the end , Mrs. Hunter remains a selfish old lady, unredeemed and grotesque."⁴

Elizabeth Hunter, at seventy, is an 'old, erratic, self-willed' woman,⁵ who is bed-ridden because of a stroke that she has had a few years ago. She is looked after by three nurses towards whom she has specific relationships. For instance, she dislikes Sister Jessie Badgery, who looks after her in the morning,

likes Sister Manhood, who is with her in the afternoons , but has a special relationship with Sister Mary de Santis, her night nurse. Sister Mary sits holding her hand at her bidding, and it is through her eyes that Elizabeth Hunter is described :

“Her face would certainly crinkle under the influence of impatience or anger, but only, you felt, to become the map of experience in general, of passion in particular. Untouched by any of this, her body had remained almost perfect: long, cool, of that white which is found in tuberose, with their same pink blush at their extremities. If it had not been for professional detachment, the nurse might have found herself drugged by a persuasive sensuousness as she helped her patient out of the bath and wrapped her in towels, during her ‘illness’.” (p.166)

It is to Mary that she makes her heart open and even makes confessions. For instance, she tells Mary about what she thinks of the paradox of human love : “ The worst thing about love between human beings.. [is] when you are prepared to love them they don’t want it; when they do, it’s you who can’t bear the idea (p.11). Later she confesses about her husband : “I wanted very badly to love my husband, Sister, even after I knew that I didn’t - or couldn’t enough” (20). While lying in bed alone, Mrs. Elizabeth’s mind wanders through a number of memories, and it is through her memories that we learn about her past life.

As a child, she says, she was a horrid little girl, and remembers how once she threw all her dolls in the river just to see what happened.

“When I was a child, Mary, living in a broken-down farmhouse, in patched dresses - a gawky, desperately vain little girl,” Mrs. Hunter’s eyes glittered and flickered as she flirted with the fringe of her sole, “I used to long for possessions’ dolls principally at that age; then jewels such as I had never seen - only a few ugly ones on the wives of wealthier neighbours;

later, and last of all, I longed to possess people who would obey me and love me of course.” (pp. 161-162)

She grew up as a great beauty, and married Alfred Hunter, more for his wealth than for love. In fact, she now realises that she didn't love her husband, and 'she never yielded her secret'(p.27). She loves the mansion that Alfred built, a mansion at Centennial Park, Moreton Drive, in a suburb of Sydney. She was extravagant : she couldn't resist beautiful and expensive objects. “She had faith in her own originality and taste—those were among her virtues”(p.32). “She overdid things. She had something of an actress in her” (p.32). After the two children, Basil and Dorothy, were born, Alfred and Elizabeth lived separately—he at Kudjeri and she at Sydney. She was always grateful to him for his 'calmer, therapeutic relationship'(p.34).She loved the luxury of having lovers, of whom Mr. Wyburd, their solicitor has been one.

When Mrs. Hunter remembers how her husband died of liver cancer, with his last word, “Why?” she tells Mary de Santis : “We, the arrogant perfectionists, or pseudo-saints, shall be saved up out of our shortcomings for further trial”(p.205).

Basil and Dorothy grow up as persons incapable of loving. Basil goes to England and becomes a famous actor and earns a knighthood. Basil, for whom marriage is for flattering his ego and for gaining sociability, has married twice, his second wife being Lady Enid Sawbridge, with whom he has constant rows. “The most amicable thing about their marriage was their parting”(141).

Elizabeth knows her son to be 'a wobbly, hopeless male (p.355)'. Dorothy grows up with hatred for her mother in her heart; to her mother is "an evil heartless old woman"(p.71). She becomes a Roman Catholic and marries Hubert Bullivant and flies to France. In France she leaves Hubert and marries de Lascabanes, who is old enough to be her father, just to be called a princess.

Elizabeth has no desire to die however stagnant her life has become. "She only hoped she would be allowed to experience again that state of pure living bliss she was now and then allowed to enter"(p.24). Inwardly what she longs for is a purity of heart, which she knows she lacks . She is not a materialist , but she loves to keep her jewel box always with her, just to keep up her self-importance. She likes sister Flora Manhood because she is young and sprightly. In her buffeting and caresses Elizabeth experiences an animal presence which her mind craves even when her body shrivels into skin and bone. Flora's flippancy and sensuousness reflect her own sensuousness and irresponsible spirit of her younger days. Although Mrs. Hunter's mind wanders at times, it always appears to be searching for subtleties. Mr. Wyburd, who is terrified of her as much as ever, says that she is the most complex woman he knows. Sometimes she is very humble and modest. She says to Flora, " What do you need? Praise, love, beauty - anyone can do without them ... They aren't necessary. You can live on potatoes and a cup of milk - like an Irish peasant in a bog" (p.317).

Elizabeth has had one stupendous mystical experience at the eye of the storm, an experience of transcendence which has now become part of her self. Once she had gone to Brumby Island along with Dorothy, where they were invited by the Warmings. There she meets a marine ecologist, Professor Pehl. She becomes very intimate with him to the great dislike of her daughter. When she had gone for a walk along the beach with the Professor, all of a sudden they are caught in a cyclonic storm. She finds herself separated from the Professor and sees that the house in which they were living has become a debris. She felt that she was no longer a body. least of all a woman. Suddenly she found herself in the still center of the storm, its eye. It is at this moment that she had her illumination :

“All else was dissolved by this lustrous moment, made visible in the eye of the storm. She accepted to become part of the shambles no worse than any she had caused in her life in her relationship with human beings”(p.410). “

She was a being or more likely a flow at the centre of the jewel of light: the jewel itself ...existed only by grace; for the storm was still visibly spinning and boiling at a distance” (p.409).

She had a miraculous escape. With her dress in tatters she walked bare foot on the sand. She was in the grip of great joy which released her from her body and all the contingencies. She was disturbed by the mystery of her strength, of her elect life. Suddenly she found that her desire to possess had left her . It is this moment of illumination that Elizabeth Hunter has always cherished and she still longs for this state of pure living bliss.

Sir Basil and Princess Dorothy arrive from abroad to meet the dying mother. All the three act their roles to perfection. Elizabeth is very happy to be alone with her loved ones and enjoys a state of perfect stillness. Elizabeth tells them, "... but I shan't die anyway, not till I feel like it" (p.61). Dorothy has come to coax a respectable sum of money out of her mother whom she both loves and hates, and she thinks that the nurses are but parasites who are sucking her mother dry without her knowing. Basil agrees with his sister, they discuss the matter with Mr. Wyburd : Should the aged mother be sent to the asylum for the aged or to a convent? A convent is out of question because, they feel, mother does not have the rudiments of a religious faith. Meanwhile, Elizabeth, who knows her children very well, arranges to see that they are given fat cheques so that they keep their mouth shut.

Until now there has been no overt action. Now there are a number of incidents. For instance, Flora goes to see Basil at the Onslow Hotel where he is staying. For him making love to her is a performance, and she willingly slips into his arms. He hopes that he has planted a baby in her. This romantic visit is followed by another visit - that of Mary de Santis to Basil, which he finds boring.. They talk about theatre, particularly about King Lear, 'that storm-tossed tree'. 'Between Basil and her soul's eye, hovered the face of her pitiful father'(p.339), and she returns empty-handed. Basil and Dorothy go to see their mother and speak to her about the old people's house. Mrs. Hunter replies : "Tell me when you want me to die"(p.413).

Basil pays a visit to an Old Women's House. Later he and Dorothy go to Kudjeri, their family estate. They find that the house at Kudjeri is also full of Mrs. Elizabeth Hunter. They spend the night in the parents' bed in an incestuous embrace.

Mrs. Hunter tells Sister Mary that she can withdraw her will to live, and asks Flora to keep by her side two bottles of sleeping pills. She has already given her nurses gifts of jewels, and she gives Mrs. Wyburd all her family chairs. In her will she leaves \$5000 to Wyburd and \$500 each to her nurses. Nobody could help her now, only herself and grace. She dreams of the island, the sands, the waves and the seven swans. She dies while she is sitting on her commode. Flora lays her body on the bed and calls the doctor, and thus she reaches the end of her responsibility.

Basil says, "Mother had from life all that she could have wished for: beauty, wealth, worldly success, devoted friends, and - friends...Mother wasn't afraid to die."(p.537). Dorothy realises that bereavement could become a luxury. She says that, for all her faults, mother was an enchantress. Both are happy that mother has left them equal portions. Both Basil and Dorothy prepare to leave the country, for they don't belong there.

Mary de Santis gives her verdict : 'Mrs. Hunter wasn't sick. She was old, cold and cruel....Happy? No, altogether she was human.' (p.584)

Elizabeth Hunter's personality is so complex that it generates different opinions. William Walsh says that intensity of life characterises her character,

and that she pours vitality into her decrepit life. She is shrewd, manipulative and cruel. "But she is much more than superficially cruel. Manipulation of others is a function of the ferocity with which she lives and a kind of purity and disinterestedness with which she serves herself, the vessel of life."⁶ Walsh calls her 'a dying eagle', seeking transcendence in her death.

What Walsh calls vitality and ferocity of living, Edgecombe calls 'moral ambivalence' in the fusion of cold-bloodedness and humanity.⁷ There is a note of complaint when he says : "It is into this context of very imperfect humanity that White injects his mystic concerns."⁸ He wonders how to tackle "the paradox of moral unworthiness and mystic aspiration that lie tangled at the core of the novel."⁹ Should we call it the inscrutable purpose of God? He says : "All that is intimated is the infinite frailty of humankind and the inexpressible power of God as He prosecutes His plan."¹⁰

Mark Williams has a totally different view of the novel and its protagonist. He is right in saying that we have to take into consideration the comic level of the narration and the forceful ironies which are built into the plot. For instance, Elizabeth Hunter dying while she is sitting on her commode is quite comic and grotesque. As far as the mystical experience is concerned he says, 'Elizabeth sees only what she wants to see in herself.'¹¹ 'Forceful ironies surround the mystical level of the meaning in the novel.'¹² 'The dichotomy of flesh and spirit, sensuality and sensibility...runs through the novel, and the

former is never denigrated.”¹³ Williams concludes, ‘*The Eye of the Storm* is playfully subversive of the religious themes and the stylistic concerns that have figured in White’s previous fiction.’¹⁴ and ‘the novel is preoccupied with role-playing and disguise of the self.’¹⁵

Mark Williams opens our eyes to the comic dimension of the novel, but we have to remember that that is only one of the dimensions, which heightens the serious concerns. White is ironic when he deals with certain characters, say, like Basil and Dorothy, and certain situations like the affair between Flora and Basil. But one cannot say that Elizabeth’s experience in the eye of the storm is comic. On the other hand, it is highly poetic. What we have to see clearly is the strange mixture of comedy and poetry. What David Tacey says in this regard is significant: “The commode (her throne) scene brings together the sublime and the banal, the spiritual and the human. It is a comic finale, a divine comedia.”¹⁶

Now let us look at David Tacey’s psychoanalytical analysis, which has some insightful remarks and some unacceptable ones. For instance, a statement like “Mrs. Hunter is a personification of the author’s unconscious life,”¹⁷ is most unacceptable. But a statement like “She is the most successful of all White’s characters, the greatest artist of the self and the most able to benefit from the spiritual and material richness of the world,”¹⁸ is acceptable, though one would like to soften the superlative ‘the most’. But Elizabeth as “the artist of the self” is brilliantly insightful. Again when Tacey says that Elizabeth’s ‘is a sublime journey through integration’ is also acceptable if

'sublime' is dropped. As an old woman who holds together so many persons around her, she must be a remarkable woman. She is also remarkable in the way she looks at her past life with a critical eye. It is the transcendent moment in the storm that gives significance to her life, which lends her a spiritual stance from which to evaluate her own life, the people around her, and, finally, to take a decision to withdraw from life. It is her strength and wisdom that certainly lead her to integration and self-individuation..

Elizabeth Hunter is one of the remarkable women protagonists Patrick White has created, both from the outside and the inside and also from the various points of view of other characters, both intimately through her feelings and thoughts and from an ironic distance of objectivity. "The final answer" that White seems to have embodied in the novel is that, however gifted or limited we human beings are, we have the capacity, if we are blessed, to experience mystical moments of divine ecstasy, which in turn gives us a meaning to life, like T.S. Eliot's 'moment in the rose garden' and, in addition, a criterion of evaluation of our experiences, and wisdom and power. The significance of life does not lie in the intensity of living even at the point of death, but in the intensity of awareness and clarity of vision, and that is what Elizabeth Hunter has right up to the last moment of death.