

## Chapter V

### A FRINGE OF LEAVES : *Encounter with Darkness*

After creating two extraordinary women protagonists, Laura Trevelyan and Elizabeth Hunter, Patrick White takes up an Amy Parker-like ordinary woman and puts her in alien worlds and explores the way the naked humanity in her encounters the forces of darkness. Ellen Roxburgh is as interesting as any of White's women protagonists, and more credible and more human than any other. Even Amy Parker whose ordinariness she shares, cannot vie with her in the range of experiences and the depths of suffering.

The novel is based on the true story of Mrs. Eliza Fraser who was shipwrecked on her husband's brig off the Great Barrier Reef in May 1836. But except for a few details perhaps, White couldn't have taken much from the story. Ellen Roxburgh is a characteristically Whitean character and the design of the novel is entirely his own. Ellen Roxburgh, says William Walsh, embodies 'one of, perhaps the, constituent convictions of White's art. This novel develops.... the idea that men must have, as Lawrence put it, a religious connection with the universe.'<sup>1</sup>

It is profitable to trace Ellen's life stage by stage, since each stage is marked by a dramatic change of context which brings about significant modifications in the quality of her life. There are two stages in England, first her life on the Cornish farm, and the second as Mrs. Roxburgh in Cheltenham.

The next three stages are located in Australia, the third at Hobart Town, the fourth in the island of the Aborigines, and the last, which is also important, deals with her life after she returns to the Australian mainland. Ellen's life is a continuous progression into increasingly complex and disturbing experiences.

Ellen, whose maiden name is Ellen Gluyas, is the daughter of Cornish parents. Her Pa actually wanted a boy to look after his farm and was disappointed when Ellen was born. Her aunt, married to substance and early widowed, calls Pa 'Dick the Hopeless' and Mama 'Clara the Helpless', and Ellen 'whatever-will-become-of-her.'<sup>2</sup> Father is given to drink - 'While sober he was jovial enough...an idle muddler. But drunk, he became passionately abusive and unjust' (p.48). As a child Ellen is lonely, and she believes in Pa's stories about tokens and witches. But she is always drawn to nature, and being strong and healthy, she helps her father in the farm work, and her mother whenever she has a lodger.

Once Mama takes a lodger, Austin Roxburgh, who is a man of means but in poor health. Ellen is awed by his books and medicines, but soon awe turns into pity. Austin depends on Ellen on many things during his daily life, and once when he is caught in a storm, she protects him and brings him home safe and sound. She mothers him all the time, and he admires her strength of character. After Austin goes away, Ellen attends a dame's school. Austin Roxburgh has a literary bent of mind and a vague, uneasy creative aspirations. He thinks of a project - 'to create a beautiful, charming, not necessarily

intellectual, but socially acceptable companion out of what was only superficially unpromising material (p.61)' He writes a letter to Ellen saying that he would stay again with them in summer as a lodger. Ellen sends a reply, saying that her mother is dead and they cannot afford to look after a lodger. Her father, who takes increasingly to spirits, dies too. Then she decides to accept Austin Roxburgh's 'extraordinarily injudicious proposal' (p.47).

After the wedding Austin's mother, who pities Ellen, gives her a ruby necklace and a topaz collar, and books to read - books like Bishop Taylor's Sermons and Miss Edgeworth's works. Ellen sits with them but doesn't read. Ellen, who is a sensible girl, gradually learns the ways of a lady and to love her husband in a manner acceptable to both. She learns to submit to his 'hesitant though loving rectitude' (p.76). She learns to suppress her natural ardour, which he finds bitter, and to wear a mask, 'because he was an honourable and a pitiable man' (p.76). In the second year of the marriage, she conceives, but she miscarries. Two years later she gives birth to a son, who passes away soon. Old Mrs. Roxburgh, who is intimate with God, initiates Ellen into religion, which she accepts only in a formal way. The mother-in-law advises her to keep a journal, the way her son Austin does. A farmer's daughter married to an honourable gentleman, learns 'to accept moral precepts and social rules, most of them incongruous to her nature' (p.80).

Old Mrs. Roxburgh is always worried about her second son, Garnet, who has left England and gone to Van Diemen's Land, Australia. Unlike

Austin, Garnet is brimful of life and health ; and inevitably wayward. As Austin says, "Poor Garnet, he was never bad! Rash, admittedly, and too personable. He had the fatal gift of attracting almost everyone he met. The wrong people led him astray' (p.79). Garnet was accused of forgery, but nothing was proved, and he fled to Australia, to seek a new life. There in Hobart Town he has carved out a life for himself by marrying a considerably older widow of means and, after her death in an accident, inheriting her property and making himself an important man in the community.

Old Mrs. Roxburgh dies. Austin is deeply affected, and he goes into a prolonged period of mourning. When Garnet invites him to Hobart Town, Austin prepares to go there with his wife for a change of place. The novel actually begins with the voyage of Austin and Ellen to Australia and from Sydney to Hobart Town in the brig called Bristol Maid, and through flashback, depicts their earlier life. Austin, who reads Virgil all the time, is very keen on meeting his brother, whereas Ellen 'puts her arms to embrace the cold future'(p.42). Miss Scrimshaw, who is a co-passenger, thinks that there is nothing spiritual in Ellen's beauty, and she also senses her dissatisfied soul. Ellen herself feels that 'life has cheated her out of some ultimate in experience. For which she would be prepared to suffer, if need be' (p.21).

At this point of time, Ellen is thirty years of age, of medium height, with candid, cold eyes. She is fond of wearing a shawl with a beautiful fringe, and loves playing at the fringe. William Walsh points out how this image of the

fringe is woven into the narration emitting various suggestions and 'hints both of comfort and desperation, of settled convention and the tattered ends of experience'.<sup>3</sup> She has a sensual apathy for reading, and she sometimes becomes nostalgic for her childhood world on the farm, full of activities like milking cows and driving the cart. Sometimes she is so agitated that she feels, 'I can accept anything for the sake of peace - in this frightening world' (p.41). Among many things she writes in her diary, there is this : 'A husband can become one of his wife's pleasing habits'(p.68).

Garnet welcomes his brother very affectionately, with great gusto. "You look well, you old, creaking gate!" he shouts. He shakes Ellen's hand, and 'She was aware only of the blaze from blue sceptical eyes, an intensification of the milder, shallower stare of the child in the miniature, and a hand uncommonly hard, like that of some mechanic, or farmer' (p.81). She recognises in him 'something coarse and sensual...noticed his thick wrists and hairs visible on them' (p.83). She is repelled not only by the man but 'by her thoughts, which her husband and her late mother-in-law would not have suspected her of harbouring'(p.83). She likes the house, 'Dulcet', large, spacious, filled with comforts. Later she writes in her diary: 'Garnet R. is kindness itself. My dislike is quite unreasonable' (p.86).

A subtle sensuous relationship starts taking shape between them. Garnet gives her a black mare called Merk, and when she goes riding, he meets her as if by accident and tries to talk to her. She asks him why he doesn't

remarry, to which he retorts, 'Marriage does not cancel loneliness'(p.101).

After Christmas, when once she goes riding towards the clearing near the river, he chases and seduces her, but the victim is Garnet, who accuses her, "Oh Lord, what have you done to us, Ellen?". Ellen has an 'experience of sensuality she most awaited all her life' (p.116). Garnet dreams of a continuation of the love-relationship. But Ellen becomes guilt-ridden, and decides to leave Dulcet and take lodging in the town to get prompt medical help for her husband. Garnet, desperate, kills Merk, which she interprets as an act of deliberate cruelty. Dr. Aspinall's wife, who is Garnet's mistress, tells Ellen, " You are too sensible. At this rate you will not begin to live" (p.132). Ellen tries to console herself with the explanation that 'it was because some demonic force had overcome her natural repulsion'(p.133).

Garnet tries to console her by saying that most people on the island are infected, and she has caught the disease, and suggests : "You and I would enter hell the glorious way if you could overcome your prudery"(p.137). She retorts, "I hope to redeem myself through my husband, an honourable man"(p.137).

Mr. and Mrs. Roxburgh learn that the Bristol Maid, which has recently berthed from England, is to return home, via Singapore and the Cape. They are happy to get a cabin on the brig, and they set sail bidding good-bye to Garnet, Dr. Aspinall and his wife. On the seventh day out from Sydney, there is a thick fog on the sea, and when they are having a nap in the afternoon, they hear all of

a sudden a rumming and grinding, They realise that the brig, which has struck a reef, is keeling.

With the tremendous turmoil that follows the wrecking of the ship, the novel enters a dramatically changed level of 'action' - the struggle of survival in the impending doom. Austin Roxburgh holds the strong hand of his wife and scrambles up the deck with his overcoat and cap. Ellen packs her leather dressing case, grabs the mantle, ties her shawl tighter and gropes upwards with her husband holding her hand. Water has already penetrated the cabins. At this moment of crisis, she wants her husband to tell her whether she has not made him unhappy. He asks her not to be afraid and considers her question foolish. She says, "I am not afraid for myself. It's for you. And my child"(p.170). He notices her 'my child,' but he says with generosity of heart, "Our son is our best reason for surviving"(p.170).

They scramble up the sloping ship, now lying broadside on the sea. Mr. Roxburgh goes in search of his Virgil, and when he manages to scoop it out of the water, it is sodden. The rain falls throughout the night, and husband and wife doze against each other. Ellen wishes to sit alone and 'to give up the many-faceted role she has been playing - 'of loyal wife, tireless nurse, courageous woman, expectant mother ...a compliant adulteress'(p.175). In her thoughts she is torn between reality and actuality.

Adultery has already brought dissociation in Ellen's personality, a dissociation far worse than the one she suffered when she, a Cornish farm girl,

married an invalidish man twenty years senior, and one who belonged to a different stratum of society, which altogether suppressed her natural passions. During the first dissociation, she tried to achieve some reconciliation by tying herself to her sense of duty and her feeling of compassion. But the second dissociation, though it gave her some sensual satisfaction, has made her so guilt-ridden that mentally she almost breaks down. Now this grave physical danger urges her towards renunciation of all the roles she has been playing so far. But she has just one bond, her child, which is inside her womb. During the tortuous journey in a leaky boat she miscarries and loses even that one bond. What remains is a formal, thin bond with her husband.

During the terrible journey in the long boat with no rudder but only sails, at one point Austin falls down into the water when the boat lands on a reef. She does not feel like holding him - 'She could have done nothing for this frail spillikin no longer her husband as he was whirled away.' Somebody lifts him and helps him out. On this reef, Ellen goes in search of her husband and sees Oswald, a lad who worked for Spurgeon disappear in the sea, where he has gone in search of shellfish. Oswald, who likes and admires her, is carried away into the sea in front of her very eyes. This incident hits her so deep that she keeps silent about it. Pilcher, who hates rich people, asks her to give him one of her rings, which she does, saying that she never felt that anything belonged to her anymore. It is on that hopeless, rainy night that she throws into



the sea her still-born baby. At last, in the morning, they spy a shore, glistening with white sand.

The castaways crawl to the shore like crabs. 'Hunger and Greed quickened into ecstasy' (p.239). When they are eating some newly fried fish, half a dozen savages, black aboriginals appear, armed with wooden spears, and attack the survivors. Captain Purdew and Mr. Roxburgh are killed. Dying, Austin Roxburgh says, "Pray for me, Ellen". She could not, would never pray again. She only says, "Oh, no Lord! Why are we born then?"

David Tacey says, "Naturally the shock of seeing her husband dying forces Ellen back into life...She is again, as after Oswald's death, faced with meaninglessness."<sup>4</sup> Tacey explains her railing against God as follows: "Ellen, however, is an eminently normal person - unlike many of White's protagonists - and desires the kind of surety human life doesn't offer. Her railing at God is one example of this, and so is the fringe of leaves she fashions for herself, and in which she conceals her wedding ring."<sup>5</sup>

The blacks return and surround the whites and strip them naked. They take the captives away into the hinterland, leaving Ellen alone. In the evening black women approach and surround her, chattering and laughing. Ellen senses that this is 'the beginning of her martyrdom' (p.242). A girl flings a handful of sand in her face. 'Mrs. Roxburgh barely flinched, not because sustained by strength of will, but because the spirit had gone out of her' (p.242).

The tormentors do all kinds of thing with her, pull her hair, throw her down, drag her to her feet, pull the rings and so on. Ellen shouts, "Take them - only leave me my wedding ring"(p.242). The natives glower and cower to hear 'the voice of one who might have been a supernatural creature"(p.243). They rip off her gown, and tear at the corset. Then she herself undoes it and pulls off the shift. "and she was liberated" (p.244). They retreat with her in the undergrowth, where Ellen makes for herself a fringe of vine leaves and ties it round her waist, hiding her wedding ring in the fringe. She is then taken to the camp of their tribe. She finds no sign of the crew and the officer. Her feelings at that point of time are described as follows :

"She was not so much afraid as resigned to whatever might be in store for her. What could she fear when already she was as good as destroyed? So she awaited her captors' pleasure." (p.246)... "An automaton was what she must become in order to survive." (p.247)

She is asked to nurse a sick child. When it is feast time for the aborigines, she is not invited. Later on they fling a fish-tail and a dorsal fin. Her dry soul endures everything. A little girl is asked to spy over her. The women admire her and consider her to be 'the supernatural come amongst them in their own flesh'(287). They anoint her body with grease and charcoal with pious respect, and enthrone her on an opossum skin rug. In fact, they and she have a 'mystical relationship'(p.287) of some sort.

The child she has been nursing dies. And after the death ceremony is over, they dismantle the huts and migrate, and they have their next camp in the

mangrove thicket beside a river. She works like a beast of burden, develops an aptitude for climbing trees in search of birds' nests. She endures everything, including a warrior fingering her upto the nipple. Once two women fight and one of them, the beautiful one, dies. They eat the dead body of the girl. 'She shared with these innocent savages an unexpectedly spiritual experience' (p.271). And she eats the remains of the feast. She becomes a cannibal.

As Laurence Steven says, "The most explicit symbol of savagery is cannibalism."<sup>6</sup> Patrick White compares the cannibal feast to the Christian Eucharist, a sacrament in which the worshippers are united to Christ by partaking of consecrated bread (Christ' flesh) and wine (Christ's blood). Ellen feels that 'in the light of Christian morality she must never think of the incident again' (p.272). What is important to notice here is that Ellen is in a new ethical situation, in which she has to come to terms with darkness. After partaking the tribal sacrament, she feels compassion for the natives, because she comes to know them and their predicament. It is difficult to agree with Laurence Steven when he says, "She recognises herself in them after she has eaten off the human thigh."<sup>7</sup> What he suggests is that there is inherent savagery in a human being, but the truth is that she understands the pattern of their culture and the sacramental nature of their cannibalism.

The tribe builds small boats for the crossing to the main land. The people in the tribe get busy digging ditches and gathering firewood. When she is doing this work, she meets a pseudo-black man with a hatchet. She tries to

talk with him and discovers that he is a prisoner who has run away from the Australian main land. She seeks his help to escape from the tribe and she promises to get him a pardon. They keep quiet during the festivities and participate in the frenzy of dancing and feasting. She learns that she is to become the property of the physician-conjurer, Turrwan. She enters Turrwan's hut where the conjurer is watching a magic crystal. She goes out where Jack is waiting and quietly, when no one is looking, they flee without leaving any tracks. When it is night they take shelter in a cave, where Jack insists on sleeping with her, saying, "Two bodies that trust can't do hurt to each other"(p.298). When Jack sees her wedding ring, she panics: "if I lose it I am lost"(p.299). On the way she develops compassion for Jack, who is peculiarly dependent on her mercy. She pities the convict who had killed his wife Mab, in a fit of anger. She is full of gratitude towards him, because of his kindness and strength. She loses her wedding ring and she suspects that Jack must have taken it. When they approach civilisation, her Roxburgh-self reappears and drives a rift between them. Jack bolts away, and Ellen, guilt-ridden, gradually enters the civilised world. Later she is questioned by the officers, and she answers all their questions with great cautious wisdom and does not give out the essential truth of her experiences. "No one is to blame, and everybody, for whatever happened "(p.363). However, she seeks Jack Chance's pardon with the government officials.

Ellen comes to know that Pilcher, who had behaved inhumanly with her in the long boat, has escaped from the doom that fell upon others. He has built a chapel, to which she goes in search of him. She does not find him, but in the chapel, she experiences an awareness of divine grace. “This beatitude is not arbitrary”, says Laurance Steven, “but a continuum that began in her relationship with other human beings.”<sup>8</sup> Manly Johnson, in his article, “Patrick White: A Fringe of Leaves,” says, “Peace of mind settles on Ellen with the realization that the Roxburgh’s Lord God of Hosts and Pilcher’s God is Love are the same God.”<sup>9</sup>

During her ship journey to Sydney, Ellen meets an elderly Englishman, Mr. Perms, who offers her a proposal of marriage, which she accepts. David Tacey, in an article, ‘A Search for a New Ethic: White’s A Fringe of Leaves’, says, “The suggestion that Ellen will remarry[sic] an English gentleman does not indicate a regression, but is the very proof of her accommodating ability, which is the mark of the true redeemer.”<sup>10</sup> Mr. Perms spills tea on her dress and she puts her hand on his trembling hand and stills it, saying, “It is nothing. I do assure you, Mr. Perms” (p.404). It is an indication, says Steven, “of a wholeness unparalleled in White’s work.”<sup>11</sup>

Carolyn Bliss rightly says, “A Fringe of Leaves is the obverse of Voss ...while Voss is all will Ellen is will-less... Ellen is more acted upon than acting.”<sup>12</sup> Mark Williams, who also compares this novel to Voss, says, “In a sense, A Fringe of Leaves rewrites Voss, but with a woman as the protagonist

and without the extreme metaphysics of the earlier novel.”<sup>13</sup> He points out that Voss is determined to impose his vision on the landscape, whereas Ellen does not have Voss’s surpassing arrogance, and she has no control to reshape her world. She is less presumptuous than Voss, “because of her openness to experience and to self-modification.”<sup>14</sup> He further suggests that “the measure of her self-knowledge is her new ability to enter into the sufferings of others.”<sup>15</sup>

Ellen Roxburgh is indeed a remarkable character that Patrick White has created, without recourse to extraordinary mental or psychic states or mystical experiences. The entire novel moves on the level of credibility and identifiable realism, and there is not a single false note in her characterisation. This can be construed as Patrick White’s commitment to the human reality. Laurence Steven says, “In A Fringe of Leaves White makes the commitment to human relationship, to the human world, that he has previously been holding at bay.”<sup>16</sup> The epigraph from Louis Aragon at the beginning of the novel also suggests this : “Love is your last chance. There is really nothing else on earth to keep you there.”

There is another epitaph which throws significant light on Ellen : “If there is some true good in a man, it can only be unknown to himself.” (Simone Weil) Ellen is basically a good woman, and her apparent deviations are the results of the abnormal situations she is forced to encounter. Even her lapse with Garnet is forced upon her by her situation, by the suppression of natural

instincts, by the normal dream of the experience of passion. Even her participation in the cannibal sacrament is forced upon her. At the core of her basically peasant personality, there is a zest for life and a strong commonsense. Her 'openness to experience and self-modification' that Mark Williams speaks of<sup>17</sup> is not a self-conscious thing. It is, on the other hand, a passive acceptance of things as they come, and an active accommodation to the new and strange situations she finds herself in. There is a strong element of innocence in her, which, for instance, the lad Oswald immediately responds to. The fact that she finds consolation in the children of the tribe and later with Kate is also indicative of her innocence. She is basically moral, too, though she is apparently immoral in some situations. Fortunately, she is not dominated by Christianity to suffer the weight of sin and a sense of the evil. She has never been brought up as a pious Christian. On the other hand, as a child she believed in superstitious stories of tokens and witches, particularly of 'the white witch at Plymouth' (p.50), and later she accepts Old Mrs. Roxburgh's religious teachings only formally. It does not mean that she is a secular humanist or something. There is no ideological thinking in her. She gets educated in the school of life and, inevitably, gains wisdom and her own kind of knowledge of the world. She is essentially human and essentially good. She achieves integration without willing it, but by swimming with the current of life, floating and drifting when the waters are placid, and riding the waves when they are high, never giving up. She is extraordinarily fortunate, too : for

instance, the natives do not kill her and eat her, and then she accidentally meets Jack Chance who takes her back to civilisation. In fact, all the major events in her life are chance happenings. Life is full of such chance happenings, but the way she takes advantage of them shows her grit and courage and downright earthiness. But Patrick White makes her feel at Pilcher's chapel 'an awareness of a divine grace', and this any common woman would feel after going through such ordeals.

David Tacey considers Ellen as a symbol of a civilised man's 'secret yearning for things passionate and dark'. This is obviously far-fetched and ideological. He also says that she embodies in herself a criticism of 'sterile civilized life', which has 'lost touch with an essential instinctive vitality.'<sup>18</sup> Patrick White has worked into the novel some idea of this kind, but it is a secondary matter, compared to the positive celebration of vibrant humanity in Ellen's character.

William Walsh reads into her character his own obsession with 'intensity of life': "The events of the novel, the crises of her experience, make up a full register of a convincing human life, and Ellen Roxburgh's constant search for some intensity of being gives point and dignity to, as it confirms the strength and reality of, her humanity."<sup>19</sup> The greatest wisdom that Ellen shows is in what she tells Miss Scrimshaw towards the end of the novel, "I expect we shall make our blunders, but would you not say that life is a series of blunders rather than any clear design, from which we may come out whole if we are



lucky?" (p.392) To err is human, and if you are lucky you transcend your past and start anew. What is important is the will to live and retain your goodness and capacity to love.