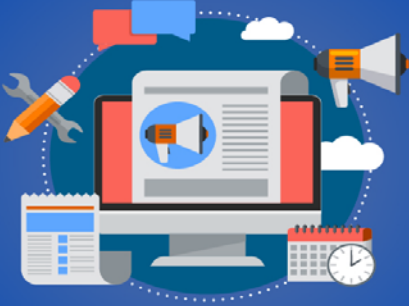


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Protagonists' Suffering and Survival Instinct in the Select Novels of Patrick White

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Abstract:

White's basic theme, man's eternal quest for meaning and value, is universal and timeless. His novels tackle man's struggle, suffering and emptiness. The protagonists suffer and sacrifice their happiness to survive. White argues that, "the purer the suffering, the greater the progress". His heroes have a special quest to know the "extraordinary behind the ordinary". Almost all his characters undergo tremendous suffering and struggle to achieve a wholeness and vision. White's fiction embodies his characters as 'explorers' who undertake a metaphysical journey which further gets manifested in their quest and they suffer too from a sense of isolation and alienation. The paper is attempting the recurring theme of suffering throughout his novels.

Keywords: Suffering, Hollowness, Sacrifice, and Emptiness.

White has influenced the world literature with his prestigious fiction writing. He presents a 'saga' of his characters who happen to go through power to self-illumination. Almost all his chief protagonists, face failures in their life. His novels give an illuminating experience of characters. White perceives the truth in the actions and experiences of speculative individuals who are willing to explore the reality. He is identified as a writer of national significance. He is one of the most read and re-read Australian novelists in English literature of the twentieth century. William Walsh has rightly observed:

Patrick White is a strong/ individual, richly gifted, original and highly significant writer whose powers are remarkable and whose achievement is large. His art is dense, poetic, and image-ridden. It is always a substantial and genuine thing. At its finest it is one which goes beyond an art of mere appearances to one of mysterious actuality. (42)

White has tried to purify the 'unconsciousness' of a man to escape from the emptiness, which is possible only through suffering. He debates on an individual's dissatisfaction in society and in the sphere of life to seek solace in his self-conceived world. The author himself records:

"I always like to write three versions of a book. The first is agony and no one would understand it. With the second you get the shape, it's more or less all right.... The third gives some enlightenment out of that suffering...." (Driesen 72).

In his first novel, *Happy Valley*, as in all his subsequent novels, White is preoccupied with the concept of suffering. He has introduced to the theme of the novel by an epigraph, quoting the Mahatma Gandhi:

It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone . . . the purer the suffering the greater is the progress. (Brissenden 16)

Happy Valley is imbued with pessimism. Its name is an irony as there is no happiness in *Happy Valley*. Most of the characters of this novel suffer from unconscious acts of cruelty by others. There is an all-pervading atmosphere of gloom and doom hanging over *Happy Valley*. The town happy valley is ugly, bleak, uncompromising and evil. It is said that happiness could never blossom there except hatred, malice and discontent. White writes of it:

There never was co-operation in Happy Valley, not even in the matter of living, or you might even say less in the matter of living. In Happy Valley the people existed in spite of each other.... in summer when the slopes were a scurfy yellow and the body of the earth was very hot,' lying there stretched out, the town, with its cottages of red and brown weatherboard, reminded you of an ugly scab somewhere on the body of the earth. It was so ephemeral. Someday it would drop off, leaving a pink, clean place underneath. (28)

The houses of *Happy Valley* are "poor and dirty, with skinny old women rooting about in their backyards, like so many rickety fowls" (46) "There is something relentless about the hatred induced by human contacts in a small town. (191)

The protagonist Oliver Halliday is dominated by his egocentric self. He makes a mistake in his own assessment of his future happiness:

"This is the part of man, to withstand through his relationships the ebb and flow of the seasons, the sullen hostility of rock, the anaesthesia of snow, all those

passions that sweep down through negligence or design to consume and desolate" (p. 327), and: "...the township of Happy Valley with its slow festering sore of painfully little intrigue. (18)

The characters of this novel, Halliday and Alys Browne know intuitively that they can never achieve happiness in the strangling atmosphere of evil which pervades *Happy Valley*. They try to flee, yet their fleeing is in itself a destructive act against Oliver's wife and children and therefore evil.

Patrick White describes Oliver Halliday's spiritual suffering. He upholds the idea of suffering that promotes the individual's progress. Suffering is a spiritual attribute and this spiritual attribute may be achieved after having endured meaningful suffering which includes conscious spiritual growth and a release from the physical demands of the body.

Oliver Halliday, a doctor has found *Happy Valley* as the home of pain. Everyone there has painful story of loss, loneliness and escapism. The characters like Halliday, Alys Browne and Sidney Furlow long to uproot themselves from the trap of the sickening town. Halliday feels caged in loveless marriage with an older woman and is eager to move to Queensland, but is distracted by a blossoming friendship. But *Happy Valley* has proved a place from where no one can have easy exit. In course of time, the characters learn and accept to live life of sorrow.

Suffering is an indispensable condition of the being that culminates progress. Halliday suffers by alienation from his family and by separation from his own wife Alys, his lady love and his suffering, in fact, lubricates his life to give him a fresh insight into his life. He goes beyond the physical phenomenon of life. He is illuminated with metaphysical understanding of life to experience moral progress. This transformation has prepared him to be happy to accept suffering as he has understood its redemptive value.

In the beginning of life, Oliver is more beastly, lacking compassion. He sees human beings in the reduced state of animal beings. He has developed an affair with Alys, a music teacher who is a source of illumination. Oliver is more conscious of his isolation which perhaps has made him understand of Alys beyond what she is. He is convinced that Alys and Rodney, his son, deserve to be treated with regard and respect. In the journey of his life of dilemma, he deeply realises that he has been reduced to "a kind of machine for doing" (123). He begins to see everything with new matured perspectives dictated by human values.

In his Miles Franklin Award-winning *Voss*, White presents a mysterious German explorer who has come away from his homeland in order to discover the strange primitiveness of the interior of Australia. He attempts to overcome the challenge of crossing the Australian continent for the first time. *Voss* centres on two prestigious characters: Johann Ulrich Voss, a

German and Laura Trevelyan, a young orphaned woman. Ulrich Voss comes in Sydney and meets Laura Trevelyan, and Mr. Bonner, a patron of the expedition. After having meetings, Voss decides to lead an expedition into the interior of the Australian continent. Since Laura has been in love with Voss, she breaks into sobs, when he leaves her in the ship. Laura's feelings are not understood by the members of her family. Their love in separation grows more and more intense than before. Voss seems to be obsessed with Laura, his desire to communicate with her becomes irresistible. He, therefore writes a letter to Laura asking her to join him in the thought. He expects from her intellectual and spiritual companionship. He requests her to align herself with him in intellectual and volitional activities. Both of them are aware of their own arrogance and hatefulness. The arrogance in Voss points out the arrogance in Laura. The communication between the two lovers takes place spiritually and telepathically which perhaps offers them a new strength to bear the pain of physical separation.

The love that grows between Voss and Laura is a love between mentally attuned souls—a bond which can never be broken. Laura's silent love shapes the character of the aimless wanderings of a mad man. In the end, Laura meets Judd, one of the survivors of the mission of Voss, and comes to know for certain that Voss is dead. Judd proclaims that Voss was not a God but a true Christian and was more than a man. He served the sick and the distressed. Laura is moved and agrees with him totally.

The novel *Voss* ends in a positive note as Voss almost becomes a martyr. Voss' salvation which could not have happened without Laura lies in his will power. Voss is sometimes an ordinary man, sometimes an explorer, sometimes a foreigner, sometimes a leader and sometimes even equable with God. Patrick White uses the psychology of the explorer as a metaphor of man. Voss embodies the belief that simplicity and suffering are the conditions for the re-making of man. The hero himself sees his expedition to the centre of Australia in an allegorical light. He intends it to be a spiritual as well as a physical exploration. Voss' expedition across the continent is indeed a torturous journey into the mindscape.

Voss is not only exploring an unknown land but also exploring his own self and the mind of the native people. Voss and his party have to go through many unexpected hazards and problems over the months. He attempts to find the meaning of reality through a vision. His quest is primarily inward into the depth of his own natures. He moves into a realm of vision and is able to explore the meaning and value of his life.

White's historical novel, *A Fringe of Leaves*, is based on the real life experiences of Eliza Frazer, a nineteenth century English woman who was shipwrecked off the Queensland coast in 1839. She was then taken a captive by the aborigines. (Rao 75). The heroine Ellen

Roxburgh undergoes several trials and tribulations. Mrs. Ellen comes from a poor status. She has to endure male chauvinistic suppression her life too. Ellen makes a journey from civilization into the Australian darkness and emerges back to civilization with a better understanding of herself and others.

Ellen is an uneducated, simple and coarse girl not belonging to the civilized class. She gets married with Austin Roxburgh who is much older than her. Austin goes with her wife Ellen to meet his own brother to Garnet to Australia. While returning from there, the Bristol Maid, a ship goes wrecked on the way of returning to England. All the crew members are killed by the inhabitants of coast except Ellen. Her suffering starts when the aborigines of the island try to touch her body and tear her dress. She finds herself nude among them but helpless. They are very cruel by nature. She tries to escape from them. Thus, this colonial child has been enslaved, imprisoned by the aborigines. She is forced to use the oppressors' code and managed to twist it in order to express her identity. At first, Ellen anxiously lives among them, but later she attains a balance among them. Through this novel, White shows how Ellen suffers and strives for her own existence and identity.

Ellen's second journey starts with Jack Chance, an escaped convict. As her husband Austin and other crew members have been killed by the hands of aborigines in the shipwreck. She has to shed all the symbols of civilization - clothes, rings under the capture of the aborigines. Somehow, she manages to hide the wedding ring her body with the fringe of leaves. The wedding ring and the fringe of leaves "become symbols of the civilization she has been torn from, and in them Ellen places her hope for a preservation of her humanity" (Steven 134).

Among the Aborigines, she lacks freedom and has limitations. She has to eat the thigh-bone of the dead aboriginal girl. She has done so because of extreme hunger. She never feels guilty about her act. She believes "that she had partaken of a sacrament" (FL 244).

Jack Chance plays a very crucial role in Ellen's life. In spite of the ill-treatments at the hands of these primitives who have killed her husband. Ellen is unable to hate them. Neither does she love them. She is attached to the black children and finds peace by spending time with them.

The 'suffering', she undergoes in the midst of the primitives and her previous willing affair with her brother-in-law Garnet enables her to come to terms with her "heart of darkness" which is a major step in her quest for self-knowledge and a new identity. Perhaps the affair with Garnet and later with Jack Chance are also acts which come under her presentiment of evil. The affair with Jack Chance unravels the bottled-up passion within herself which she was unable to express as a civilized woman.

Thus, *A Fringe of Leaves* of Patrick White depicts Ellen's journey through life, and her education through suffering in endurance and understanding and compassion and love. She is basically a modest and sensible human. She is full of gratitude to her husband Austin and her convict-rescuer-lover, Jack.

The next novel *The Eye of the Storm* is modelled upon White's mother Ruth. Her character has been drawn strictly according to how White perceived her mother. The novel begins when Mrs. Elizabeth Hunter, central consciousness, is troubled with an ambivalent feeling about the arrival of her two ageing children, Dorothy and Basil. The characters of this novel describe their discomfort and prefer the metaphysical to the physical. In this novel, Elizabeth Hunter tells about her inability to convey her experience on the island:

If you could describe your storm; but you could not. You can never convey in words the utmost in experience. Whatever is given you to live, you alone can live, and re-live, and relive, till it is gasped out of you. (399)

The novel presents a struggle between the main protagonists Elizabeth Hunter and her children Sir Basil and daughter Dorothy. It gives a vivid picture of the life of Eliza's family. The novel opens by showing Elizabeth as bed-ridden, dying in her magnificent house in Sydney. Elizabeth is a dominant figure in the novel. As the novel progresses, her children Basil and Dorothy have no care or love for their mother. Instead, they are led by greed and the essence of material gain inspires them much. All the major human relationships in the novel appear to be governed by an obsession with material gains and sensual pleasures.

In this novel, Mrs. Hunter has no affection for her husband Alfred and her children Basil and Dorothy. Neither she is true to her husband, nor to her children. Similarly, they too have no affection for her. She is an utter failure in the way she brought up her children. When she is bed-ridden and dying on the bed, there is none to care for her. Hunter is the victim of her own cruelty and ambitions. White uses the storm, as suffering, to form the integral part of the novel's strength and meaning. *The Eye of the Storm* projects Elizabeth, a wealthy socialite woman who lives in her Sydney mansion desperately. This novel is full of vanity, love, hatred and kindness. Elizabeth is a powerful matriarch of her family who is also full of cruelty. Being on her death bed, she still maintains her cruelty who always rules with an iron fist.

The novel projects Elizabeth, as an old widow, blind, bedridden and deserted by the children. This novel is full of vanity, love, hatred and kindness. Elizabeth is a powerful matriarch of her family who is also full of cruelty and believes in vice. Being on her death bed, she still maintains her cruelty who always rules with an iron fist. Her children Basil and

Dorothy have no care for her. Instead, both are greedy and are governed by an obsession with material gains.

His next novel *The Tree of Man* in which he shares an outcome of his experience. It explores several mysteries of life and deals with various aspects of human experience. White portrays the nostalgia of the characters of this novel who struggle for permanence. This novel is based on the journey of some ordinary people's lives. Stan Parker, hero, goes through a long journey in time before his quest of selfhood is complete through the nostalgia of permanence. His journey starts with heroic struggle to carve a permanent settlement in the wilderness of Australia. He is a young man but inexperienced in the ways of the world:

Life had not yet operated on his face. He was good to look at; also, would seem, good. Because he had nothing to hide, he did perhaps appear to have forfeited a little of his strength. But that is the irony of honesty. (TM 9)

This novel is called hero-oriented and presents a saga of Satan and his wife Amy. Stan Parker has a special quest in his life. The novel covers every possible aspects of the lives of ordinary Satan and Amy. White's characters always run his own famous statement 'an effort to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary'. Satan and Amy retreat to their inner lives of visions, while Ray Parker, son of Parker, moves to create another world of his own and for Thelma.

The wilderness of the novel attracts all the readers. Stan Parker comes alone, and then brings his wife Amy too. They have two children later. Stan Parker walks into the virgin bush where the silence is immense. From the novel's beginning, the bush assumes religious dimensions comparable to a cathedral. A crucial passage of *The Tree of Man* describes a powerful storm that strikes the area and the flood. Such unpredictable weather characterizes Australia, where bush regions suffer drought for years then heavy rains flood the parched earth. The raging water heightens the drab landscape and figures as a pivotal experience in Parker's quest for understanding.

Stan Parker carves a home in the wilderness, and brings to it his wife Amy. They raise two children, both of whom bring disappointment and mortification. They experience the calamities of flood, fire and drought. They drift apart Stan goes to the war, Amy commits casual adultery. They come together again; they grow old and die.

All the novels taken for study explore the sufferings of the central characters. They achieve their vision undergoing various sufferings. They fulfil the emptiness and attempt to escape from emptiness and suffering. It is certain that an ultimate goal is achieved through self-knowledge and struggle. Suffering produces endurance, hope and makes it clear that pain leads

to spiritual growth. This study focuses on the evolution of White's thinking as a writer. The title is justified since the protagonists achieve the vision of realisation through suffering.

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