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## **Cultural Nationalism & Frontier: A Study of Patrick White's Voss**

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### **Abstract:**

*The aim of this paper is to discuss the complex pattern of nationalism and cultural negotiations in Patrick White's Voss. In this novel, Patrick White creatively fractures the essentialist notion of cultural identity. Dialogic interactions between two disparate cultures create interstitial space that profoundly unsettles the authority and authenticity of imperialist culture. The paper attempts to read this novel within the context of the myth of Australian colonialism and escapism and at the same time it celebrates the spirit of Australian nationhood.*

***Keyword: Nationalism, Cultures, Patrick White, colonialism and Escapism***

### **Introduction:**

The rise of Australian nationalism has always been a difficult proposition. Identity, representation and belonging, as we know, are inextricably related to a belief in cultural citizenship. In re-mapping the Australian model of cultural citizenship, it is necessary to examine the socio-cultural politics inherent in the contradictory spaces of identity. The "terra Australis incognita" concept of the ancient classical geographers like Pomponius Mela and Ptolemy is relevant here. They considered "Europe" as an idealized space, an ideotypes, God's created space. In accordance with their classical belief in oppositional balance, they imagined

that the northern continent must be balanced by an equal land mass below the equator. This led to their belief in the existence of “terra Australis incognita” (the unknown southland). This vision of a Southland therefore haunted the imagination of the explorers for centuries. Australian literary endeavour has always been part of a distinctive nationalist project. Early writers like James Hardy Vaux (*The Memoirs of James Hardy Vaux*, 1819), Henry Savery (*Quintus Servinton*), Henry Kingsley (*Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*) show two different perspectives. While Vaux and Savery’s fiction implies a sense of alienation from the land, Kingsley or Marcus Clarke (*His Natural Life*) begins to substantiate the sense of Australianness. These novels are thoroughly immersed in the tradition of convict literature. However, these novels are also attempts at writing the self. This principle of self-imaging comes to be gradually transformed into a form of nationalism: in other words, it marked a progress from the self to the nation.

### **Myth of Australian Colonialism in Voss:**

According to Gibson (*Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia*) apart from being a historical novel *Voss* also belonged to the “explorer’s literature genre”(Gibson 199). Great explorer authors like Mitchell, Stuart and Eyre hugely influenced White and *Voss* was a product of such a influence. The story of *Voss* is found to run parallel with the story of Ludwig Leichhardt. The novel as Peter Wolfe states “captures the Australian spirit at a time of burgeoning nationalism.”(Wolfe 104). He adds:

The distinction between suburban gardens and the vast mysterious outback, the importance of emancipists, those former prisoners who stayed in the colony after serving their time, and the growing popularity of the word “country” over the earlier “colony” all described Australia trying both to define herself and discover a sense of common purpose(Gibson 104).

*Voss* can be regarded in simple words as the story of a foreigner who tries passionately to explore the continent and search the truth about a mysterious land. Gibson comments:

In *Voss* protagonist is the “guide” who absorbs dreams based on foreigner’s expectations of the land, and who then tests them against the realities of experience in an Australia, which is on the point of developing a sense of independent identity (Gibson 200).

In *Voss*, White tries to give a new life to the myth of Australian colonization. *Voss* opens amidst the social setting of Sydney and ends in the same circle on the day that a memorial is unveiled to the explorer. White describes the origin of *Voss* in *The Prodigal Son*:

[After *The Tree of Man*] I wrote *Voss*, possibly conceived during the early days of the Blitz, when I sat reading Eyre's *Journal* in a London bed-setting room. Nourished by months spent trapezeing backwards and forwards, across the Egyptian and Cyrenacian deserts, influenced by arch-megalomaniac of the day, the idea finally matured after reading contemporary accounts of Leichhardt's expeditions and A.H Chisholm's *Strange New World* on returning Australia (Bjorksten 57).

The Australian Land or rather more specifically "Central Australia" (Gibson 200) carries a different value to different groups of people in the novel. For *Voss* and his followers it is a land of "hopes and dreams"(Gibson 200) and they want to explore this mysterious land in order to know the fascinating truth about it and their fascination may be purely of a metaphysical character. On the other hand, hardcore commercialists like Mr. Bonner and Mr. Pringle are only concerned about the profits from the expedition. Except that, they find nothing glorious about the expedition. Mr. Pringle says to *Voss*:

...it seems that this country will prove most hostile to anything in the nature of planned development. It has been shown that deserts prefer to resist history and develop along their own lines...you discover a few blackfellas, and a few flies, and something resembling the bottom of the sea (62).

White was truly obsessed with the interior of Australia. Gibson states:

...in *Voss*, White depicts the interior as a theatre in which the inadequacies of alien European civilization may be exposed and in some "native knowledge" about how to survive and flourish in the strange new world may be revealed to the white newcomer (Gibson 201).

### **Theme of Mystery and Escapism:**

*Voss*'s journey to central Australia represents an escape into the mysterious, the unknown but fascinating chaos which according to Gibson "is daunting but also Australian and which must be confronted if European people intend to persevere in the continent"(Gibson 201). The desire

to flee from Australian colonial life in search of true Australian identity and culture is one of the highlighting aspects in the novel.

White is very much skeptical and critical about the spiritless Australian colonist-settler society. The colonist society in *Voss* finds “the road to Sydney monotonous, even from a carriage”(10). Australia is a “country” which is of great subtlety”(11) the colonists consider it as “the most contrariest place”(40). The White Australian colonists do not consider the country as their own even if they lived in it and they consider their staying as an “unfortunate accident”(40).“Idealism” (40) brought them into the Australian “terra-nullius.”

According to Gibson, Patrick White feels that Australian nature has much to offer to people who manage to modify their European prejudices. Gibson feels:

The garden of rational, refined civilization may prove inferior to the natural desert (Gibson 202).

As Peter Beatson felt that Voss and his party members find the desert of Central Australia not full of only “barren wilderness” (Gibson 202) but they also discover “a teeming population of animals, aborigines, earth spirits and ghosts” (Gibson 202), all which he feels are intimately related in a “totemic, animistic religion” (Gibson 202) which gives Australian culture a new meaning of identity.

Voss and his party members are regarded as “a microcosm of the Australian colony” (Gibson 202). Gibson further adds:

Members of the new colony, dreaming of wealth and freedom (of paradise, perhaps) confront actual Australia and forced to compromise their expectations and thereby to modify their collective consciousness. The journey outlines the progress of a society learning to adapt to the land, learning to “understand” (to use Laura’s term) the spirit of the place. (Gibson 211).

This understanding would help Australia’s cultural citizens to understand their identity with respect to the country.

### **Spirit of Nationhood in Voss**

Many obstacles challenge Voss’s spirit of nationhood, which comes in course of his journey to the interior. He is determined to face all odds and in spite, all difficulties and complexities he declares:

I will not consider the personal appeals of love...or deviate in any way from my intention to cross this country (290).

This shows his spirit of nationhood. Even when the party gets divided into groups he is still determined to continue the expedition.

As the party moves on, the members of the party surrender to the wilderness of the frontier in Central Australia. Australia became a 'devilish country' for them. Turner outbursts emotionally:

I cannot! I cannot! (336).

The party's journey to 'hell' i.e., central Australia brings doom for some of them. Palfreyman gets killed by the "blacks" and many decide to leave the expedition. Finally, Voss meets his death at the hands of Jackie. This incident evokes cross-cultural differences in one single nation. Voss's attempts to be friends with the blacks pathetically fail. The blacks also mercilessly and savagely killed the horses and the mules taken by the White men for the expedition. After Voss's

death, he may become "history" but he definitely "left his mark on the country"(443), as pointed out by Colonel Hebdon. White writes:

The blacks talk about him to this day. He is still there- that is the honest opinion of many of them-he is still there in the country, and always will be(443).

We find a spirit of nationhood, which Voss bears with him as he explores the land. He derives this from the spirit of the land and after his death, he acquires his national identity. His presence would be felt in his absence. White writes:

...if you live and suffer long enough in a place, you do not leave it altogether . Your spirit is still there (443).

Voss's indomitable spirit is still very much present in the wilderness of Central Australia. Laura feels that his spirit of nationhood will not go waste. She declares:

He is still there, it is said, in the country, and always will be .His legend will be written down, eventually by those who have been troubled by it (448).

One can easily remember Voss's statement:

To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself (34).

He leaves his mark in the country by destroying himself. Suffering will have its reward. White wants the death of European prejudices and that is why “death” is one of the important conclusions in some of his novels. Judith Wright feels that his writing is mostly concerned with “a matter of death-the death of European mind, its absorption into the soil it has struggled against”(Wright 335).

Voss by his death has created distinctive goals for others. Colonel Hebden has been inspired to test his energies in fresh ways. Wolfe says:

By such steps individual development channels into the growth of national self-awareness( Wolfe 118).

However, Wolfe also feels that Voss tried to give a definite shape to the Australian future which “isn’t exclusively White or European”(Wolfe 118). The different opinions formed by the Aboriginal and the Whites depend “on differences which the grindstone of Australia’s dry interior sharpens.”(Wolfe 119). The novel illustrates the consequences, which take place when one culture tries to impose itself on another. There is a lot of difference in the setting of a European mind and an Aboriginal mind. Wolfe writes:

The European mind lacks both the training and the patience to make sense of the outback, a bleak nondescript vastness but also an imaginative landscape full of subtlety and awe. Western man’s passion for control can’t upset its natural balance, which proves pervasive and unconquerable (Wolfe 119).

The wilderness of the desert- sandhills, rocky, treeless slopes, and featureless flatlands teaches one the lesson to endure hardships. Human limitations must be acknowledged irrespective of cultural difference. This Voss fails to understand and achieves, according to Dorothy Green, only “a metaphysical success”(Wolfe 119). The spirits of the black and white sufferers (mainly members of the exploration) gives Australia an intensity of national self- consciousness in spite of cross-cultural differences.

## **Conclusion**

Voss can be termed as a cultural model who fails abysmally to come to terms with the destructive forces of Australian cross-cultural issues. He may well be termed as a legend who sacrifices himself to the national longing. The novel Voss projects the tragic sense of life that goes against the safety of the world. The protagonist avoids making deals with the society. By exploring the Australian frontier and coming across cross-cultural issues, Voss loses everything,

including his life but he gains only one thing i.e., “true knowledge” which can only be achieved by a torturous death in interior Australia. His actual longing was to explore the heart of Australia all alone and barefooted. Voss can thus be termed as an alienated mystic and an Australian who is trying to search his own identity in a land, which is always haunted, by extinction, oblivion and anonymity. The novel *Voss* stands as a exploration saga and it is a journey not only to the interior of Australia but also towards Australian knowledge. Voss dies a heroic, mysterious death while exploring the continent. He disappears in the vast outback and he is never found. The novel reinforces obligation, the ongoing imparity, to fight aggressively and defensively to protect one’s identity in search of a nation. This is Australia’s imagined culture and tradition.

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