



Fictional Narratives on Patrick White with Special Reference to *The Vivisector*

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Abstract: The research paper “Fictional narratives of Patrick White” with special reference to *The Vivisector* contains a brief description of fictional and factual narratives, an introduction and analysis of some major works done by Patrick White and on the basis of that analysis his major themes were also discussed. His life and experiences and the major themes of his writings is briefly presented. The writing style, characters, plot and settings are some essential tools for every writer that is why it becomes mandatory to be discussed with reference to his major works. Special reference is given to his eighth novel *The Vivisector* (1970) because of many reasons and one of those reason is the protagonist of this novel ‘Hurtle Duffield’ who is a painter but not an ordinary painter but a painter with an exceptional ability to look into the reality of a person. This character presents the conception of an artist, also he was a megalomaniac certainly and a Luciferian hero. He is a reflection of White’s own personality and their life and experiences are so close to each other that it looks like we are reading Whites autobiography. This paper is a humble attempt to describe Whites major themes, his personality and his ideas towards life and self realization with a reference to the novel *The Vivisector*.

Keywords: • Megalomaniac; • Mystical illumination; • Archetypal Romantic; • Symbolic evisceration; • Vivisection; • Vivisector’; • Disfigurement; • Painter manque; • Epiphany; • Devilish Ventriloquist; • Hideous; • Depraved’; • Nouveaux riches; • Ambivalent; • Satire; • Anglican egotist; • Agnostic; • Occultist; • Existentialist; • Christian Australian.

Through the title “Fictional narratives of Patrick White with special reference to *The Vivisector*” itself we are clear about the topic that we are going to discuss this research paper but before heading towards our main point of discussion let me clarify the definition of 'fictional



narratives' in order to attain more clarity. A fictional narratives is a made up story which is written by an author by using his imagination and sometimes combining it with his real life experiences and bit of his own personality. Whereas a factual narrative means a literary piece of work based on facts like a biography and autobiography. So, precisely whatever a writer creates is a reflection of his past experiences accompanied by his present vision towards life; And we are going to discuss fictional narratives of Patrick White.

Patrick Victor Mandale White, better known simply as Patrick White, was an Australian writer born on May 28, 1912, in London. He died on September 30, 1990, in Sydney, New South Wales, at the age of 78. Over the span of his career from 1935 to 1987, he produced twelve novels, three short-story collections, and eight plays. He was the only Australian writer honored by Nobel Prize (1973). His childhood was unpleasant due to the adverse situations faced by him. He inherited Chronic Asthma from his maternal grandfather. Due to fragile health and bitter experiences he spent his childhood as a loner that made him different from others, as a result he chooses his interests accordingly. His creative journey started at the age of six when his mother took him theatre to see "The Merchant of Venice". As he grew up he became more expressive but his style of expression was different. He expressed his hidden emotions through his writings. He was a full-time writer, part-time theatre artist and a 'painter manqué'. The problems faced by him can be seen through his works.

His central preoccupation was humanity's quest for solitude and the search for life's deeper meaning. Although he tended to live as an outsider, he also concealed his homosexuality for many years, revealing it only after his mother died in 1963. He then embraced his identity openly, describing his "sexual makeup" as "ambivalent," and asserting that this position enabled him to perceive aspects of human nature that those who were entirely male or female rarely experienced.

The writing style developed by Patrick was dense with myth, symbol and Allegory. Elements like humour, florid prose, shifting narrative vantage points and 'stream of consciousness. The major themes of his fiction can be enumerated as the alienation or restlessness of modern man, self-realization, the ambiguity of truth, or the dualistic concept of



reality. Through the novels like *The Aunt's Story* (1948), *The tree of man* (1955), *The Riders in the Chariot* (1961) etc, Patrick tried to define man and his existence, his individual experience and his relationship with external reality. Most of his earlier works consist negative perceptions towards life, man's frustration and isolation, but towards the end of his oeuvre these themes gradually coalesced into spiritual values. During first phase of his career he was dealing with man's problems and his conflicts but due to some 'mystical illumination' his themes switched to satisfactory resolution of man's problems through spirituality. This phase of his life was presented by his famous character 'Hurtle Duffield' (The vivisector), a painter who had no faith in God initially but when he turned sixteen he started believing in creator God.

Some lines from his novel *The Vivisector* are presented here with same expression. He defined him as "God is the great vivisector", who for his inscrutable purposes flays us and tortures us while we are still living".

The novel's protagonist 'Hurtle Duffield' unlike his creator was born to a poor family, he was blessed with an exceptional quality of being an 'Archetypal Romantic' person and a painter with an ability to look into the real personality of a person and he paints them accordingly. He was brutally honest towards his arts and hides nothing that makes his art horrible, disturbing but fascinating at the same time.

The character of 'Hurtle Duffield' in this novel is similar to Patrick White and as such the novel can be considered a semi-autobiographical in nature. The character and personality of White echoes through this fictional character. Unlike others novels, the novels written by White are not driven by plot but, the narrative is led by the characters (inter)actions through whom the theme is opened up. It has various themes and motifs like vivisection, disfigurement and symbolic evisceration. It is a symbolic, satirical novel and his ideas were presented through natural elements. There are two major symbols used by him in this novel like when Duffield' identifies some specific physical features of an artist: He said, "Thin skin, cruel hands and teeth like a tiger". This line defines some essential qualities of an artist, skin is one of the senses that helps to feel through a touch, hands are used for creation either through a painting or literature and teeth to bite. According to him, an artist must have sensitive thin skin to sense the real



personality of a person specially when eyes fail due to dazzling reflection of outer beauty and materialistic things, Hands should be cruel enough to present the darkest bitter truth of human personality and sharp teeth to bite the culprits hidden behind innocent faces through unfiltered true words.

His thoughts show his true personality and honest dedication towards art, which is why in another part of this novel White writes:

“The only brand of truth {Duffield’}

“is own it is inside, I’m , e reckons and as , digs inter poor fucker you’re hopes you’ll help, I’m let it out ... By turnun yet into yet into a shambles ... out of the Shambles paints what 'e calls, is bloody work of art”!

Street argot here enables’ Nance Lightfoot’ to make a key connection between sex and symbolic evisceration, painting and disfigurement. Nance was Duffield’s lady-love, a prostitute who comes to see that he used women for experimental purposes. Hurtle Duffield was a composite of several painters who basically reflects three Australian painters, Roy de Maistere, Francis Bacon, and Sidney Nolan. His character is also described in whites Memoir 'Flaws in the Glass (1981) as;

“As composite of several painters; I have known welded together by the one I have in me but never became” He met various women in his life and he painted them as well. He was accused for the murder of two ladies and those accusations were not baseless because, “They were ridden to death in an effort to transmute the sometimes 'hideous and depraved' ecstatic transports they share into artistic truth”

So, basically the true colors of those ladies were painted by him and that was a naked truth that was so disgusting that they left the world either due to shock or shame. That was his way of performing ‘vivisection’, as for him not only God is a vivisector’ but he was too. Due to the hidden quality of seeing naked truth in everyone, he was able to see ugliness behind admired beauties, and beauty behind so called ugly faces. One of his paintings includes painting of Rhoda Courtney’s who was his step sister and lady-love at the same time. Her looks were unpleasant for



normal people because she had a hump on her back. He painted her as a priestess and that painting was horrible and fascinating at the same time and a perfect reflection 'disfigurement'.

He also targeted the habits of the *nouveaux riche* from Sydney and presented them with a satirical touch. White's view of himself as a failed painter is mirrored in his portrayal of his protagonist, who is also a painter. This figure regards Yuri Zhivago as the real poet—Zhivago being Patrick White's authentic artistic ideal—while Boris Pasternak, the author who created him, is viewed simply as the person who enables his character to produce poetry. In the same way, Duffield resembles Alf Dubbo, the Aboriginal artist in *Riders in the Chariot*, in that he is not an intellectual. Whenever he tries to articulate his ideas in words, they emerge awkward and forced, as though spoken through some “diabolical ventriloquist.”

While writing this novel, White's biggest fear was the book will be received by public as “sex life of a painter” whereas it's revealed in the novel itself that his main sex activity was 'masturbation'- but it's extreme, the sex life of a man who uses woman as a stimulus epiphany would be the exact description of it.

In the last phase of his career he was tended to by a faithful boy and this is dominated by the unfinished painting in which he comes closest to realizing his vision of God through a simple painting in indigo which was a symbol of self-realization and Peace. Patrick White's works presented the same vision of God in his works during the last phase of his career.

The Vivisector was a masterpiece except for the fact that he has not discussed the scandalous topic (Kathy Volkov, a thirteen years old girl and their sexual intercourse) of notoriety that reflects some hidden parts of Whites life.

Some scholars, such as Peter Beatson, have noted that White viewed the behaviour of his characters through a satirical lens while exploring their inner lives with the insight of a spiritual thinker. White once referred to himself as “a lapsed Anglican egotist, pantheistic occultist, and existentialist.” Candid about considering himself an unsuccessful Christian, he stressed that his beliefs and values were strongly rooted in nature.

I would like to conclude his view at the end of this paper as a conclusion:



“What do I believe? I am accused of not making it explicit. How to be explicit about a grandeur too overwhelming to express, a daily wrestling match with an opponent whose limbs never become material, a struggle from which the sweat and blood are scattered on the pages of anything that the serious writer writes. A belief contained less in what is said in the silence”.

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