

## **Patrick White's *Voss*: A Journey Towards Meaning**

**Anup Kumar Rakshit**

Guest Lecturer

Belda College

Belda, Paschim Medinipur

West Bengal

### **ABSTRACT:**

The dominant concern of White's novels is the individual's search to grasp some higher, more valid reality that lies beyond or behind every day social existence. The basic theme of White's novels is man's eternal quest for meaning and value. His novels well show the quest for identity, quest for fulfillment to find out a meaning of life through self- realization or through vision. White's characters begin their journeys at the beginning of the novels finally to explore the meaning of life and reality. Their quests are primarily inward into the depth of their own natures. They move into a realm of vision and are able to explore the meaning and value of their life. *Voss*, a remarkable novel by Patrick White well shows this journey of its central protagonist, Voss, who through his epical voyage across the Australian continent ultimately discovers his original self and the selves of the native Aborigines, and thereby true meaning of life and reality. Voss's physical journey is actually a journey through his mind. Voss starts his expedition representing him as god to others, but he ends with the realization of his true identity as a common human being. This article will try to show this memorable novel *Voss* by White as not merely a novel about expedition, rather as a journey to explore the inner self of the characters, especially that of Voss.

**Key Words:** Expedition, journey, exploration, conflict, meaning.

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*Voss* by Patrick Victor Martindale White, Australia's only Nobel Prize laureate in 1973, is the most remarkable "explorer" novel of the twentieth century Australian literary history. It was published in 1957 as the fifth novel of White. It is supposed to be based on the true record of a mysterious figure of the nineteenth century Prussian explorer and naturalist, Ludwig Leichhardt who died whilst on an expedition into the Australian outback in 1848. White himself acknowledges in his notable autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass: A Self Portrait* (1981) – "the novel has a basis in the nineteenth century expeditions led by the German explorer, Leichhardt. And years before *Voss* was written, the seed of its eponymous character was sown in the mind of a sexually repressed wartime intelligence officer unhappily required to censor his own men's letters in the isolation of the Egyptian desert, at a time when all lived in the shadow of that greater German megalomaniac." This novel also makes imaginative use of the diaries of another explorer, Edward John Eyre.

However, *Voss* is a story about a man who determines against all obstacles to lead an expedition overland across the Australian continent. The novel opens in Sydney, 1845 with the German explorer, Johann Ulrich Voss preparing to cross the Australian continent. Voss's this expedition is sponsored by well-to-do Sydney draper Edmund Bonner. After collecting a party of settlers including Harry Robarts, Palfreyman, Frank Le Mesurier and Turner- a drunkard and two Aborigines his party heads inland from the coast only to meet endless adversity. The explorers cross drought-plagued desert, then sodden lands until they retreat to a cave where they lie for weeks waiting for the rain to stop. Then after the death of Palfreyman, an ornithologist who struggles vainly to reconcile his faith with his scientific principles, the travelling party splits in two- one led by Voss and another by Mr. Judd, a recently freed convict, and nearly all members eventually perish. The story ends some twenty years later at a garden party on the day of the unveiling of a statue of Voss.

Thus, the novel is about exploration, about achievement, and about disappointment. The novel does not depend merely upon the explorer's passion, insight and doom. The physical elements of the journey describe many of the challenges which the explorers have to face within central Australia at the time and combine elements of human suffering and religious metaphor.

As we read the novel, we should try to discover how, as a stranger to the country, Voss reacts to the unknown land. White's intention is to show how Voss gradually reacts to this strange land and how he is able to involve others in the process. Laura Trevelyan, niece of

Mr. Bonner gets emotionally involved with Voss as also with the adventure's mission that he is going to undertake. Prior to leaving Sydney, Voss meets Laura who perceives that Voss's journey is a challenge of will as much as a geographical journey of discovery. She also says Tom Radcliffe, "It (Australia) is his by right of vision" (Voss, Vintage 29). The passionate relationship between Laura and Voss matures during the course of the journey, and is conducted both through letter and telepathy.

Again Mr. Bonner is immensely interested in the adventure project of Voss. It has been already decided by him that Voss will undertake his journey in a ship called "Osprey". Bonner says Voss: "The master of the Osprey will carry you to Newcastle, provided you are ready to embark by the date of his intended departure. There is Sanderson at Rhine Towers, to see you on your way, and Boyle at Jildra, which will be your last outpost, as we have decided" (Voss, Vintage 20). These arrangements initiated by Mr. Boner show his intense involvement in the entire project.

Though *Voss* is a historical novel apparently, it is more than that. It explores the inner natures – psychological as well as spiritual – of the characters. White uses widespread religious symbolism to associate Voss frequently with God, Christ and the Devil. He with firm conviction prepares to go into the unknown desert. He presents himself as the leader of men. The garden where Voss and Laura meet before Voss' departure may be compared to the Garden of Eden. Voss and Laura have the visionary power to communicate with each other. White represents the desert as parallel to the mind of man, a blank landscape in which pretensions to godliness are brought apart. White represents Voss' expedition throughout the Australian continent as a metaphor of inner journey – a journey through the mind.

Before escaping the censures of Victorian Sydney, by chance Voss meets Laura, a sensitive young woman wavering in the darkness between skepticism and belief, rationalism and God, pride and modesty. In spite of their few encounters, when Voss leads his mission up the coast and turns one morning to follow his shadow into the unknown desert, he is boarding on a voyage that gives birth in his mind an inevitable deep love between Laura- the feminine side of his Jungian subconscious and himself.

Without marching towards one's own destruction, there can be no self-effacement and therefore no love. Voss and his party have to go through many unexpected hazards and problems over the months. Laura's love, burning with anxious consciousness of the leader's frailty, spreads into the fissures appearing in his besieged resolution, prizing cracks still wider in a series of dreams shattering erstwhile convictions. The effort of the human soul to cross these landscapes of land and love, in which all are destined to suffer and fail, is ultimately liberated to return into a God omnipresent in the very physicality of the earthly environment itself.

We all have deserts to cross. Voss grapples in the Australian wilderness with the rocks of his own prejudice and hatred. But he himself is also a desert, vast and ugly by Laura's accurate reckoning. Immured in hide-bound Sydney, capital of coin and kindly conceit, itself no less a desert than the country's scorching centre, she travels the path of love into this man possessed. Only through setting off on such voyages of discovery into the interior, in the final analysis into our own misunderstanding, do we bring life and love to deserts real and metaphysical- to life and love themselves. As a sage Laura senses long after the expedition is over that perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind.

For Voss a journey through the landscape results in a journey to the core of his true inner self. His relationship with the landscape passes the physical bounds and enters the metaphysical realms. The wilderness provides him a chance to understand not only the power of God but also the state of the individual soul. He achieves humility and simplicity in the west desert when he sees the circular comet.

The book, it reminds us most of, is *Heart of Darkness*, another book by Conrad about travelling into the unknown and frightening heart of a country. As Voss's party ventures further into the interior, they begin to literally fall apart. The Aboriginal guides they take with them ultimately, in a particularly Conrad-like way, revert to tribality. At one point Voss sends back with one Aborigine man named Dugald a letter asking Laura's uncle for her hand in marriage, with some notes from the expedition. Dugald, however, discovers another tribe in the bush and begins to feel pulled back toward his ancestral way of life:

With great dignity and some sadness, Dugald broke the remaining seals, and shook out the papers until the black writing was exposed. There were some who were disappointed to see but the pictures of fern roots. A warrior hit the paper with his spear. People were growing impatient and annoyed, as they waited for the old man to tell.

These papers contained the thoughts of which the whites wished to be rid, explained the traveler, by inspiration: the sad thoughts, the bad, the thoughts that were too heavy, or in any way hurtful. These came out through the white man's writing-stick, down upon paper, and were sent away.

Away, away, the crowd began to menace and call.

The old man folded the papers. With the solemnity of one who has interpreted the mystery, he tore them into little pieces.

How they fluttered.

The women were screaming, and escaping from the white man's bad thoughts. (Voss, Vintage 219-220)

This above passage well evokes the inner-self of the Aboriginal people and their hidden-hatred for the whites. This heart rendering fact that Voss's proposal will never arrive to Mr. Bonner only because Voss is a German- a stranger to the natives, shows clearly the native mind and the distance between the Whites and the Aborigines. Thus, *Voss* is a novel not only about the exploration of unknown land but also about the exploration of Voss's own self and mind, and the mind of the native people. This aspect reminds us of the colonial invasion of Australia, killing of the Aborigines. Patrick White writes in his manifesto, *The Prodigal Son*- "I was determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, duncoloured offspring of journalistic realism" (White, *The Prodigal Son*).

To each of the characters who participate in this expedition, the journey means something different. Thomas Keneally, in his introduction to *Voss*, asserts:

Edmund Bonner has recruited the team, in part to attach his name to what could be a historic expedition. To Palfreyman, the journey will have obvious scientific

usefulness. To Judd, it is an opportunity to exercise his newly won freedom and his formidable bush skills. To Voss, the journey takes on metaphysical and spiritual dimensions. Apparently reared on German idealist philosophy, he sees himself as a Nietzschean superman or the embodiment of “will”. (Voss, Penguin)

Throughout the novel Voss invokes will as a force capable of overcoming all human and natural obstacles. “Future,” Voss says before their journey, “is will” (Voss, Vintage 68).

In this novel, Voss’s figure stands opposed to steadfast, fixed meanings. He, in fact, considers the deconstructive method of destroying the normative limitations of meaning. To the doubt of Mr. Bonner about the expedition’s meaning, Voss replies, “If we would compare meanings, Mr. Bonner, we would arrive perhaps at different conclusions” (Voss, Vintage 20). Even the figure, Voss is interpreted variously. To Mr. Bonner, he is “A rude man”, to P.S., “A foreigner”, while Laura describes “Someone to whom, after all, I am completely indifferent” (Voss, Vintage 24).

Even going to determine a fixed purpose of this expedition, the fellow journeymen come to feel that there is no strict purpose. Le Mesurier says, “Purpose? So far, no purpose” (Voss, Vintage 33). Voss asserts “I would be purposeless in this same sea” (Voss, Vintage 33). Again while Le Mesurier seeks to substantiate an idea of codified routine by asking the time of the expedition, this once again breaks down by Voss’s rejection of formulaic codification: “One month, two months. It is not yet decided” (Voss, Vintage 35).

The moment of the journey in the ship ‘Osprey’ has also been conceived in terms of multiple reactions from the standpoint of involved spectators. ‘Osprey’ has become almost a symbol of a macrocosmic world in a strange, infinite microcosm. But for Laura, it is an escape out into a broad prospective world. Again the cave experience of the explorers is also variable. The cave with its rock drawings not only indicates a sense of shelter but a sense of mysterious interior that creates a design out of an apparent formlessness.

Voss’s relationship with his companions in the expedition is also diverse. Palfreyman whose suspicion of his own faith is mocked by Voss, gives lessons of humanity to the leader of the expedition even in his death. Voss acquires knowledge about the power and usefulness of humility from this honest ornithologist. Le Mesurier, who is also the *alter ego* of Voss carrying the evil demon of ambition keeps Voss’s conscience alert and mirrors the disastrous future of Voss’s ambition. Judd, who is seen by Voss as a potential rival, and whose physical strength and rationality and logic are seen as a threat to Voss’s leadership, reminds him of the human limitations. Most of the party chooses to go with Judd when he refuses to go on: “I cannot dream dreams no longer...” (Voss, Vintage 340). Voss accuses him- “As our friend Judd is jealous of my attempts to establish understanding and sympathy between the native mind and ourselves” (Voss, Vintage 341). He says “I cannot allow myself to suspect a brave man of cowardice” (Voss, Vintage 346). Judd protests- “It is not cowardice, if there is hell before and hell behind, and nothing to choose between them” (Voss, Vintage 346).

The comet, a remarkable metaphor in *Voss*, symbolizes the redemption of Voss. Its presence is felt everywhere in the novel from Potts Point to the waterhole where the Blacks have built a shelter for the remaining persons of the party and held a corroboree. In the mind of the native Blacks, there is no place for the Whites. The Aborigines cannot consider the Whites as their friends rather they have doubt and fear in their mind. This conflict finally



comes to an end with the death of Voss. Voss says Jackie, an Aboriginal, “Tell your people we are necessary to one another. Blackfellow white man friend together.” “Friend?” asked Jackie (Voss, Vintage 364-365). Jackie has actually forgotten the usage of the word, ‘friend’. Finally rejecting his own culture, to rid himself of “the terrible magic that bound him remorselessly, endlessly...” Jackie stabs Voss in the throat and then hacks his head off: “The boy was stabbing, and sawing, and cutting, and breaking, with all of his increasing, but confused manhood...” (Voss, Vintage 394).

The journey of Voss finally yields a process of gradual transition from being to becoming. It is this process of becoming that turns Voss’s journey into a quest, into a myth and makes him part of legends and history. Colonel Habden says: “Mr. Voss is already history.” (Voss, Vintage 413) This makes Voss an ideal being enwrapped by an inscrutable mystery. Laura comes to visualize this finally: “Voss did not die. He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down...” (Voss, Vintage 448).

To conclude, Patrick White shows his excellence in this novel *Voss* offering a graphic and minute depiction of a journey to explore the self of Voss and also the mind of the Australian Aborigines. The colonial conflict between the Whites and Black natives, revealed all throughout this novel, makes *Voss* a timeless story of nobility. *Voss*, thus, is a voyage to the unknown corners of the human mind. Like the struggles of the painter in *The Vivisector*, the settlers in *The Tree of Man*, Voss’s is an epic journey deep into the human condition. *Voss* is, thus, an authentic and minute portrayal of a man’s journey to find out finally his true self and true meaning of life. The novel is also excellent to evoke the fact that what we think about ourselves or about our surrounding people are not right always, with the progress of time through the journey of life the reality that may be harsh or gloomy becomes clear and visible to us. Thus, *Voss* is, undoubtedly, a vivid portrayal of the mankind’s search for a meaning for, and a value in, existence. *Voss* is also White’s emerging Australian self. For its unparalleled greatness *Voss* won inaugural Miles Franklin Award in 1957.

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