

**Australian Commonwealth Literature and
Patrick White's Selected Novels
*The Eye of the Storm and The Vivisector***

I. Shree Devi, M.A., M.Phil.



Patrick White 1912 – 1990

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Abstract

This paper first presents some of the salient features of Australian Commonwealth Literature and then discusses select features of Patrick White's novels, especially, *The Eye of the Storm* and *The vivisector*.

Patrick White is the most prominent literary guru of the Australian literary circle, and his arrival marked the most important stage in the growth and development of Australian literature.

He is a novelist, short story writer and playwright whose writing is endowed with comprehensively tackled themes. In this paper, I try to map the Australian Literature and provide some idea of White's life and literary works. The paper also deals with issues relating to self-deception to self-realization in White's novel *The Eye of the storm*. In the novel *The Eye of the Storm* Elizabeth Hunter shows that pride is self-destructive and woman can be redeemed by suffering. The storm becomes mentor in Elizabeth's life. She realizes the pausing glory of power, fame and wealth, which fail to bring a sum of satisfaction in life. It cleanses her from all unrighteous practices, negations and self-deception. Another point highlighted in the paper is the Visions of life through art in White's novel *The Vivisector*. In the novel *The Vivisector* describes the complete cycle of human life. It portrays the character of Hurtle Duffield and records repeated sexual involvements of the artist. His character depicts self-realization through spiritual love. He reaches the stage of illumination and tries to find out the relationship between 'God' and 'Artist'. In these novels *The Eye of the Storm* and *The Vivisector*, White portrays suffering as a necessity and it is the path of purification that leads to spiritual insight.

Keywords: Patrick White, *The Eye of the Storm*, *The Vivisector*, individual for identity, integrity and fulfilment. Australian Commonwealth literature

Commonwealth Literature

Commonwealth Literature today stands for literature in English written in the Commonwealth countries outside the Anglo-American tradition. What is common between the diverse members of the Commonwealth in spite of their different calendars of independence and ethnological culture, political and topographical set-ups is that all these countries share the common colonial experience. Commonwealth literature thus presents a rich variety of aesthetic and cultural experience.

Australian Commonwealth Literature

There are some journals devoted exclusively to Commonwealth literature. These include *New Literatures Review* brought out by the University of Wollongong and *CRNLE Reviews Journal* published by the Centre for New Literatures, Flinders University, Adelaide. Most of

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these journals and periodicals are literally supported by the Literature Board of the Australia Council, Australian government's arts advisory organisation. Great strides are thus being made in presenting Australia as a nation with a vital and unique literature and culture.

The centrality of the imagination is echoed in the titles of recent publications on the formation of Australia as a nation: *Inventing Australia*, *Creating a nation*, *illusions of Identity*, and *National Fictions* are examples of well-known texts across a range of disciplines. Theories of nationalism and national culture appear unresolved on the issue of imagination, implicitly resting on a modernist construct of creativity to suggest that nations are invented, fabricated or manufactured.

'The Australian story' is one of travellers, most of them men: of transportees, explorers, immigrants, pioneers, drovers, shearers, gold-seekers, bushrangers and swagmen. Australian bush mythology is shaped by the journeying of bushmen: by their departures, adventures and homecomings. The space of the bush and home is represented from the perspective of the journeying bushman.

Australian Literature is different from the traditional English literature. Australian Literature, like all great Literature is dynamic; it is the response of creative writers to the condition of life in Australia. Literature is the whole expression of a literate community's life and activity, and this expression finds its outlet through language.

Australian studies overseas have been characterized chiefly by the study of Australian literature. The Robert Menzies centre for Australian studies, which is a part of Institute Commonwealth studies, London has played a significant role in promoting Australian history and literature. The recently –formed Australian Studies Association of North America hosted a conference to discuss the developments and future prospects of Australian Studies in North America, Europe and Australia.

Similarly, The American-Australian Foundation has planned to concentrate on promoting Australian and Pacific studies at academic institutions throughout the United States and on improving interaction between Australian and American academic institutions. It recently promoted Australian studies in North America, Europe and Australia. Similarly, the American Australian Foundation has planned to concentrate on promoting Australian and Pacific studies at academic institutions throughout the United States and on improving interaction between Australian and American Institutions.

The society publishes *The Commonwealth Review*, a bi-annual journal devoted to the new literatures in English. It also publishes bibliographies and books on Australian literature. Apart from publications, the society organizes an annual conference in January where scholars from India and abroad participate. During the last three years, several scholars including Ms. Judith Rodriguez, Dr. David Kerr, Mrs. Rosemary Kerr, Dr. Terry Collits, and Ms. Sylvia Lawson have participated in the annual meets. There is a hope more and more scholars will attend these and bridge the gap between Australia and India.

Women Writers of Australia

The women writers of Australia have produced sufficient work to acclaim worldwide attention. It is indeed stimulating and rewarding to find women's views and values at the centre of the literary stage shaping the contrary issues. The earlier women writers were adept in writing letters, for exchange of epistles was of utmost significance to the early migrants.

The tradition of realism offers women writers the possibility of exploiting female experience. In the recent times, therefore, women writers have shown their concern with some vital problems, like the cruel exploitation of black women by white man. Some women writers have revealed the inner recesses of their hearts and given expression to the area i.e. marriage and the position of women in society.

Women's writing and feminism have given rise to another phenomenon in Australia publishing by women's press. Aims of the Australian group include promoting the status of

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women in all areas of book publishing and providing a forum of discussion and exchange of ideas on issues related to women.

Post-Modern Australian Literature

The quality of the Australian literary scene is dominated by fiction. The National Book Council Prize was split between two novels: *Longleg* by Glenda Adams and *Cloudstreet* by Tim Winton. Sydney based writer Glenda Adams is a former winner of the Miles Franklin award. *Longleg*, the survival story of a boy abandoned by his mother and who goes on searching for all his life, was the winner of the 1990 fiction section of The Age Book of the year.

Post-modern Australian literature can be understood as literature of the settler colony representing a complexity of the formation of both Australian cultural identity and its culture. Culture of the original aboriginal inhabitants was based on oral tradition which was either suppressed or could not compete with Australian literature based on a written tradition. During the colonization of Australia when the country was established as a British penal colony in 1788, Australian literature was influenced by the British literary tradition.

Australian Dialect of Speech

Australian colloquial speech, vernacularism, yarn, short stories, the bush experience, bushrangers as symbolic representatives of the resistance towards British colonialism and realistic writing method were the common attributes of these authors (Joseph Furphy, Henry Lawson, Barbara Baynton and many others). With a growing independence (Australia became a dominion, less dependent on Britain when the country became a Commonwealth of Australia in 1901.

Contemporary Australian Literature

Contemporary Australian literature provides important insights into Australian society that has changed rapidly and is still changing from a Jingoistic outpost of British Empire whose inhabitants, a mere fifty years ago, believed in the superiority of the white race and in the 'white man's burden' to bring true civilization to Asia and the Pacific. Contemporary Australian

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literature also gives evidence of a new Australian society that is painfully re-thinking its historical prejudices and learning new attitudes to the Asia/Pacific region.

Contemporary Australian fiction is showing an increasing awareness of anti-Asian sentiment among average Australians. Another of Australia's great fiction writers, Hal Porter, has set his first novel *A Handful of Pennies* (1958) and a collection of his inimitable short stories *Mr. Butterfly and other Tales of New Japan* (1970) in postwar Japan and has used this setting to study clichés of national identity for both Australians and Japanese.

Patrick White

Australia is famous for Literature is not usually the first one that comes to mind Patrick White, one of the most notable novelists of the twentieth century. White was born in Knightsbridge, London, to, Victor Martindale White and Ruth née Withycombe, both English Australians, in their apartment overlooking Hyde Park, London on 28 May 1912. His family returned to Sydney, Australia.

Patrick White, the grand old master of Australian literature, is a novelist, short story writer and playwright whose writing is endowed with comprehensively tackled big themes. According to Patrick White, the purpose of any work of art must not be simply pleasure giving, it must preach something to the individual. His vision is closely akin to the deep-seated nature of the spiritual yearnings of human beings and the need for recognition of the psychic potential of the human spirit of which the conscious rational processes are only a fraction of the totality. He was particularly sensitive to the precarious nature of human identity and his work continues to challenge our perception of ourselves and our reality. He has achieved in his novels a vision of life which is both distinctively individual and generally relevant, a vision which illuminates in a fresh, sometimes strange, but always revealing manner the familiar universe, and which at the same time adds a quickening and transforming element to our experience of it.

Three Major Themes

White is pre-occupied with three major themes in his novels, the obvious and influencing isolation of the individual, the quest of an individual for identity, integrity and fulfilment. These three major themes are supported by the portrayal of the transformation of Australia and its inhabitants struggling against the entrapping forces of Nature and Civilization. This has been illustrated in the satirical vein running through all of his novels in his presentation of the individual's spiritual quest which is juxtaposed with the parody of the vanities of the sophisticated society. White's novels tend to become the contemporary myths of cultural crisis, in which the adverse awareness of Australian society and the detached view of the European tradition are brought to confront and dramatize each other.

Pursuing Earthly Reality

In fact, White's novels pursue the earthly reality through their fictional representation of life in its manifold dimensions. He follows the realistic method in portraying the naked, instinctual life of Australian man pitted against the forces of cultural ambiguity, faced with the task of taming the topological monster to achieve survival and self-extension. However, White's fiction manages to escape from the limitations of the realism, as it possesses the poetic genius of the symbolist dimensions of his art.

Use of Symbols

White's use of symbols in his novels acts upon the faith and feeling of the protagonist enabling him to work out his destiny of self-fulfilment and achieve self-integrity. They stand for the guiding forces of inspiration that direct the individual's life and intensity, his sensibility in the several phases of his self-exorcism. The other symbols and images control and illuminate the structure and texture of White's fiction.

White's Stance of Omniscience

Another aspect of White's style is his stance of omniscience. In his attempt to explicate and illustrate the intensity of his character's inner experience, White uses frequently shifting points of view, himself often intruding into the narration. He seems to insist on his own presence

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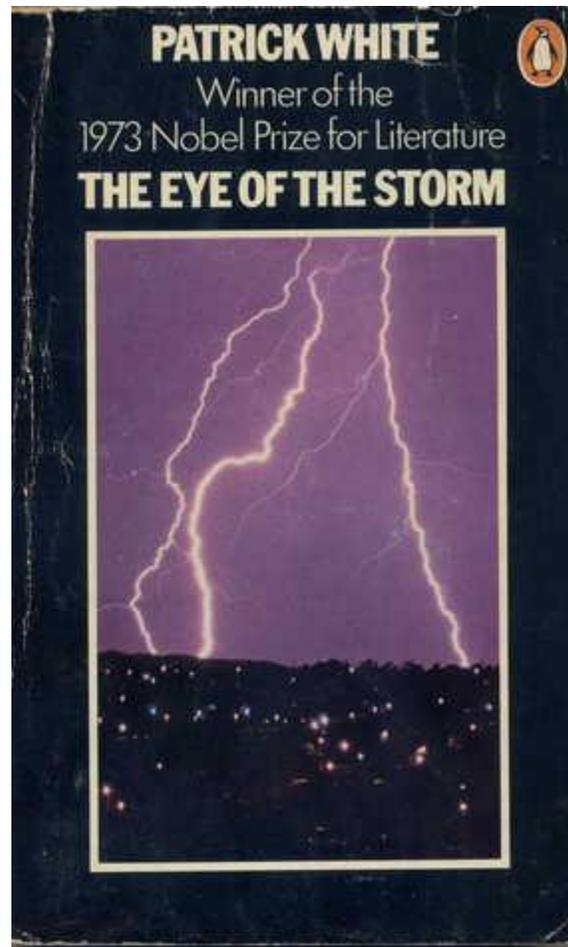
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and judgment throughout the action of the novel, and gives the impression of acting as a liberating god into his characters.

White never intends to mislead his readers. It may be said that he is rather forced to use these deliberate mystifications in order to guide one through the stumbling incoherence of the interior rhetoric of personality that forms a major part of his narration. White takes up the position of the 'Sutradhara' in Sanskrit drama, mediating between the experience of his characters and the vision of his readers and relating the aesthetic responses to the movement of life into being.

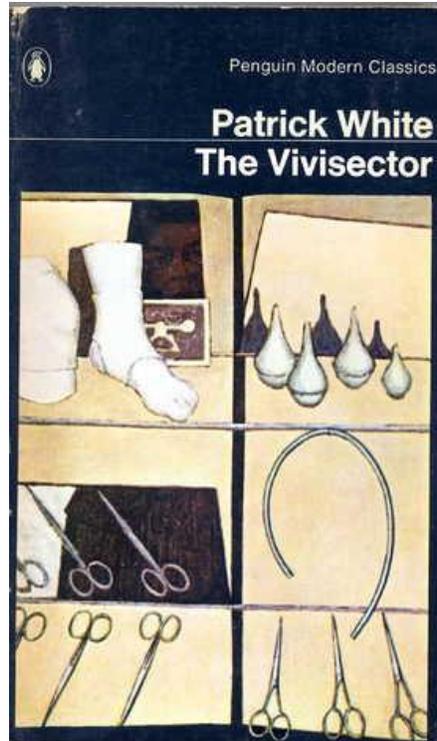
The Eye of the Storm

The novel *The Eye of the Storm* shows that pride is self-destructive and woman can be redeemed by suffering. White's intention in this novel is to bring women out of their frail nature in the materialistic society and adore them to their nature core womanly qualities. They tend to lose these core qualities due to individualism, solitariness, luxury and lack of faith in god; White asserts fair and foul qualities of women through Elizabeth Hunter in this novel. It is the story of Elizabeth Hunter undergoing the process of growth through suffering. The physical suffering allows insight into suffering through spiritual realm. White shows that suffering through losing self is only the first step of a process of finding a truer sense of self. White stresses the culmination only through sexual love.



The storm becomes mentor in Elizabeth's life. She realizes the pausing glory of power, fame and wealth, which fail to bring a sum of satisfaction in life. It cleanses her from all unrighteous practices, negations and self-deception. It functions effectively as an instrument of harmony, an agent of purification and transmutation. This helps in acquiring an understanding of the human condition and ultimately in coming closer to discovering the divine which lead her to an awareness of his human limitation.

The Vivisector



The novel *The Vivisector* describes the complete cycle of human life. The beginning and end are united through Hurtle's step-sister Rhoda. They are reunited in old age. It portrays the character of Hurtle Duffield records repeated sexual involvements of the artist. The sexual gratification becomes a fixation for him. The sense of cruelty and pathos is implicit in the act. He paints ruthlessly and dissects those women in whose life he has participated. Hurtle is struggling with his moral and personal agony in giving birth to his talent. His character depicts self-realisation through spiritual love. The total involvement in sex is not one sided, the characters around him also reciprocate. His life is fulfilled with imagination. He is not only the person to live in the fantasy world. Every hungry soul looks to it for comfort and consolation. As an old man Hurtle's pursuits are purely mystical. He reaches the stage of illumination and tries to find out the relationship between 'God' and 'Artist'.

Ultimately he succeeds in establishing the connection. His death over his indigo painting brings the novel to its logical conclusion. After a long career as a painter Hurtle ultimately fades away to the world of colour blue and remains as a personal God to Rhoda. The very human Hurtle has found his Humanity and Divinity which is given by the image of God.

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A Strong Individual, Richly Gifted

Patrick White is a strong individual, richly gifted, original and high significant writer. His powers are remarkable and his achievement is large. His art is dense and poetic. It is always a substantial and genuine thing. White's legacy to future generations of Australian writers is immense. He views suffering as a necessity and it is the path of purification that leads to spiritual insight. Through Mrs. Hunter in *the eye of the storm* novel and Mr. Hurtle in *the vivisector* novel, White teaches to suffer with dignity and to find strength in loneliness.

Patrick White's works provide a vast scope for further research. A detailed research can be done regarding illumination of individuals in the other novels of White.

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