
UNIT 4 MULTIPLE THEMES IN *VOSS*

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall acquaint you with certain problems of land and identity. When a group of people settle down in a country/ place, the question of their identification with the land naturally arises. If we analyse the basic thematic texture of the novel carefully, we will find that *Voss's* essential emphasis is on the curious interrelation between the question of land and identity. In this Unit, we shall therefore concentrate on different aspects of this problem.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Units, we have seen how Patrick White has analysed a distinctive notion of exploration in the context of the discovery of the interior of Australia. This theme of exploration naturally evokes a sense of romanticism. This idea of romanticism is intricately related to an awareness of the strange, mysterious aspect of the land. If we consider the vast, primitive aspect of Australia, we may easily locate the components of romanticism working on this land. But the strange perspective on this land may be perceived only when we consider it in connection with the problem of identity.

4.2 PERSPECTIVES ON THE LAND

So far we have looked at the multiple aspect of the land in a sporadic manner. We have nevertheless been able to gather a certain amount of information regarding some distinctive traits of the land. Land comes to be connotative only when its identity is ascertained. It is therefore important to consider the perspective of nature, its relation to the world of man; moreover the ways in which different characters contribute towards creating, endorsing and stabilising its identity.

4.2.1 Early Settlement

The history of Australian literature is marked by a continuous struggle to resolve the tension between the individual identity of the settlers and the land they have come to

inhabit. This naturally presupposes a strategic adaptation to a strange land, which since time immemorial has been man's persistent effort at stabilising himself in varying situations. In prehistoric times, when the Achaean tribes invaded Greece around 2200 B.C. they encountered a similar problem in adjusting to the indigenous Pelasgian culture. If we suggest that many early poets and novelists of Australia were mostly convicts transported from England and as such their vision of Australia was that of foreigners artificially transplanted in a strange country, we would be holding the stick by the wrong end. In fact the early settlers gradually acclimated themselves and discovered a new allegiance. One may be reminded of Mary Gilmore's famous tribute to the pioneers in her poem *Old Botany Bay*:

"I was the conscript
Sent to hell
To make in the desert
The living well."

After the initial phase of strangeness and the consequent mode of identifying oneself with the new land, there is a gradual and growing spirit of enchantment. Thus Mary Gilmore recounts the pristine purity of the early phase of settlement:

"There were no bad smells about the bush when the kingdom of the wild was its own kingdom. ... It was not till the settlement came the earth sank, and sewers burst. Once Australia smelt like spice-islands.... Ships knew before they came to her, "we are near Australia", said the seamen, "can't you smell the flowers".

This spirit of enchantment is equally noticeable in Walter Murdoch who discovers a sublime ecstasy even in a spectacle of fire:

"No language could convey an idea of the wonder and terror and beauty of the spectacle by night, when the valley below you and the hillsides around you are all one red roaring hell of furious destruction".

In short these facets are related to the problem of land, insofar as the settlers discover new roots in a strange country. But the problem of identity is complex and raises multiple themes and issues. When the British arrived in Australia, it was not an empty country. Even before the British arrived, the Australian Aborigines were roaming about in this country for 40,000 years. When the first fleet of settlers reached the shore of Australia, there were at least 300,000 aborigines in Australia belonging to many different tribal groups like the Koories, the Nimbans, the Noongas, the Lora and so on. They survived with their hunting skills, indigenous customs and pagan totemism. This problem of land and identity naturally took the shape of a warlike confrontation between the natural citizens and the destined citizens, between the state of primal innocence and the strategic intention of settlement. These multiple layers of tension between the intruders and the natural inhabitants conduce to a complex structure of racist relationship. This is partly recorded in the sad history of such aborigines as **Bennelong** or **Permulwoy**. At this stage, we would like to tell you a little about these two men. When Arthur Phillip was the Governor, he was ordered to live "in amity and kindness" with the Aborigines. He however, wanted to develop a kind of relationship with them in order to be able to procure food etc., and to be able to take them English and "turn it to the advantage of the colony". With this intention in mind he tried befriending several Aborigines, when that did not work, he decided to kidnap a few of them, force them to learn English, and act as intermediaries between the two races. **Arabadoo** was the first to be captured and was quite successfully converted into an 'English Man' but he died during the epidemic of small pox that wiped out half of the Gamaraiagal tribe in mid-1789.

Bennelong was then captured for the same purpose in 1790. **Bennelong** was however smart and clever enough to escape from the clutches of the English after six months and he made good with "a smattering of English, a love of wine and fund of stories"; (Aboriginal Australia, R Broome, p, 27). **Permulwoy** on the other hand played a different role in the history of Aboriginal culture. As European settlement spread through the island continent, so did the violence. We have to remember that Australia was not a "terra nullis" when Governor Phillips landed in 1788, (it was inhabited by the indigenous population later termed Aborigines). By the late 1790s, the Hawksbury River area, eighty kilometers north west of Sydney, supported over four hundred Europeans who were mainly farmers and agriculturalists. These Europeans "farmed on both sides of the rich river flats for a distance of about 50 kilometres". As a result of this several conflicts broke out in the region. "The Aborigines explained to Governor King in 1804 that the settlers' farms blocked their access to the river and thus much of their food supply. When they crossed the farms to get to the river they were fired upon by the settlers who claimed the Aborigines damaged and burned their crops". The Aborigines retaliated against this display of European injustice by forming raiding parties and attacking the Europeans. Of these (so called) marauders was an Aborigine, the Europeans called 'Mosquito', who was captured and transported to Van Diemens's Land (Tasmania). He became a stock worker and then a tracker several years later. He then led the Oyster Bay tribe on one such raid, was captured and finally hanged in 1823. At Toongabbie, west of Sydney, in 1897, **Permulwoy** did the same thing. He led Aboriginal fighters against the soldiers and settlers until he too was eventually shot down. "In ghastly fashion, his severed and pickled head was sent to Sir Joseph Banks in England," (R Broome, p, 29).

We have mentioned these two Aborigines to you to give you an idea of the kind of society that prevailed then, the power struggle and the complexities of politics between the two races. We shall now look at 'Nature and Men' in the next section.

4.2.2 Nature and Men

In New South Wales, the natural background seems to be obliterated by the intrusion of a civilised pattern of life. Nature is here articulated into the artifice of a garden. Laura therefore asks Voss to see the garden of her uncle: "You must see the garden. Uncle has made it his hobby". When Voss asks if they go much into the country, Laura again refers to it in terms of pleasure-trips or picnics: "Not really. Not often. We drive out sometimes for picnics, you know". Here we come across a kind of drawing-room society, gossiping, chatting and absorbed in their world of small interests. But we discover different patterns of nature. In New South Wales, Voss is particularly struck by the growing pleasantness of nature: "It was a gentle, healing landscape in those parts".

Again Sanderson who leads Voss to Rhine Towers is a man of culture. Though he is secluded from the artificial pageantry of civilised life, he remains absorbed in his own world of contemplation: "They [Sanderson and his wife] had whole row of books, bound in leather, and were for ever developing them". Let us now take a brief look at 'Nature at Jildra'.

4.2.3 Nature in Jildra

At Jildra, nature becomes a dry and perched. "By now the tall grass was almost dry, so that there issued from it a sharper sighing when the wind blew". But nature here expands into something vast, mysterious and secretive. It appears to be a "flat country of secret colours": their figures look small and the horses become almost children's ponies, when they are fore grounded against the background of vast nature. Here light explodes and breaks "into flashes of clattering, shrieking, white and sulphur light"; and trees, too, were but illusory substance, for they would quickly turn to shadow, which is another shape of ever-protean light". The seasonal cycle in the novel develops a pattern of linear extremity. It starts with the spring. Thus Patrick

White describes: "One evening that spring when the street was already dissolving, and amiable pedestrians were calling to one another in friendship." But there is a distinctive change in the seasonal impression, as the explorers leave Jildra: "They had entered, as it happened, a valley sculptured in red rock and quartz." As they proceed further, they begin to be swept by intermittent showers of rain. In this context, we may also consider a significant topographical design. The story begins at New South Wales, which represents an apparently semi-urban civilised society with the Bonner family at the centre of the fictive design. We depart with Voss and his party to proceed towards New Castle and then to Jildra. Finally we are led into the arid topography of the continent. Moreover the journey by the ship *Osprey* is also briefly padded into the design. There are, therefore, three different topographical perspectives: land, water, and the desert. These three topographical variables create a triune perspective that creates a sense of integrated totality.

In the next section, we shall look at the 'Problem of Identity' and examine the various problems emerging from this crucial notion of 'identity'.

4.3 PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

What do we really mean by identity? Identity means an assertion of the individual self. But this sense of identity comes to assume a greater significance only when it is studied in relation to its immediate context. In Australia this sense of identity should be examined with reference to the settlers. But their sense of identity becomes meaningful when their relation with the land is appropriately substantiated. Keeping this in mind we shall now look at the settlers of New South Wales and their problems with identity.

4.3.1 Settlers of New South Wales and their Reactions

The problem with the settlers of New South Wales is that they do not comprehend the nature of their identity. As the novel begins, the settlers show an inexplicable aversion to this country. Laura says to Radclyffe: "It is not my country, although I have lived in it". Le Measurier considers it to be a "damned country" and seeks to discover the real purpose of Voss. It seems to be a country where certain people come to make a fortune. Laura points out: "He does not intend to make a fortune out of this country, like other men". But still for Belle it seems rather outrageous to go far into the country for an exploration which is uncertain and disastrous: "I would not like to ride very far into it, and meet a lot of blacks, and deserts, and rocks, and skeletons, they say, of men that have died". Mr. Bonner is all the more forthright: "Everyone is still afraid, or most of us, of this country, and will not say it. We are not yet possessed of understanding". The basic inadequacy of their argument is that they examine this land absolutely in physical terms. Even when Mr. Bonner feels enthusiastic about this country in relation to their identity, he looks at it purely from the standpoint of administrative machinery which is for him imperative of progress and identity: "We have only to consider the progress we have made. Look at our homes and public edifices. Look at the devotion of our administrators, and the solid achievement of those men who are settling the land". In contrast to the problems faced by the settlers of New South Wales, is our protagonist, Voss. Let us now examine Voss and his sense identity.

4.3.2 Voss and his Sense of Identity

Voss's journey is not merely an explorer's adventurism. It is perhaps a quest for determining the nature of individual identity in a strange land. In endeavouring to explore this country, Voss and his team - mates begin to determine their identity within a particular framework of contextuality. The entire process of the journey

becomes in effect a linear progression into the psyche – a journey towards the self. But the question of identity may be properly ascertained with reference to the sense of totality. While the settlers themselves feel distanced from the spirit of the country, Voss even though an explorer may be identified with this land. While Radclyffe says that the country does not belong to Voss, Laura affirms: "It is his by right of vision". It is only this right of vision that generates identification with the land. Thus the unknown strange land that Voss undertakes to explore becomes incarnate in the personality of Voss. Laura therefore ecstatically says: "I am fascinated by you. You are my desert". This right of vision accelerates a greater perception of the country and its inhabitants. Though the whites living in New South Wales are firmly established in this country, they are culturally as well as psychologically distanced from it. They have come here either as free settlers or as convicts; hence, proper assimilation into its culture is yet to be achieved. Though settled in Australia, the country they have left still lurks in the background. Their basic inadequacies lie in their attempt to discover in Australia those value-systems they have left in England. They forget that England is their past and it is part of their memory but Australia is their present and it forms the total perception of their immediate reality. Therefore Laura's proud claim "I was born in England" seems to be self-defeating. But Australia is the governing symbol that exists as a form of strange timelessness. The final phase of Voss's journey is only apparently racist; but there is an inner layer of ritualism. The surface pattern of the journey projects a confrontation between the whites and the blacks. The blacks again and again interrupt and disturb the explorers. They steal their compass, their cattle and finally they take away Judd and Voss; and they kill Voss. The killing of the horse, the reference to the snake-king – all seem to be part of a ritualistic performance through which Voss ultimately comes to be amalgamated into the original native perspective of the land. Perhaps there is a suggestion of total self-extinction through which one can be absorbed into the land's native purity. Thus even before his death, he can perceive the archetypal pattern of native life: "The men had painted their bodies with the warm colours of the earth they knew totem by totem, and which had prevailed at last over the cold, nebulous country of the stars". Having looked at Voss's sense of identity let us now take a quick look at Laura's dilemma.

4.3.3 Laura's Sense of Identity

Laura initially strikes us as a quiet, silent and reserved woman largely absorbed in her own world of mystical meditation. But gradually she is drawn to this search for identity. Laura seems to be a paradigm of waiting, but this particular aspect of her character is distinctively related to the central theme of identity. Living within the closed framework of civilised pattern, she almost runs co-extensive with Voss's journey. Thus even in the course of Voss's journey where she is not physically present, she appears and disappears in terms of Voss's mystic vision. She spiritually accompanies Voss and continues to be an inevitable part of the journey. Though she in fact remains confined to the concrete world of New South Wales, she undergoes a metaphysical experience of being transported to the world of Voss. It is through such experiences that she begins to be identified with the Australian world. She also becomes gradually entangled with Rose's psychic struggle in relation to her pregnancy. The entire household develops a sense of hatred against Rose. Mrs. Bonner particularly finds it extremely disturbing. But Laura becomes sympathetically associated with Rose. The birth of Rose's child and Laura's determination to protect the child after Rose's sudden death may be read as a distinctive symbol. The child is an Australian in its true sense of the term. All the characters presented here are mostly foreigners settled in Australia. Naturally they are implanted in this country and they have no indigenous claim on this country. But this child is born in Australia and it really symbolises the making of a country and foreshadows the Australian dream.

For Laura, it is perhaps the future – the determined future of a generation that properly belongs to this country, born and brought up in a country that they would

love. Thus Laura indirectly contributes to the specific theme of identity. It is therefore no more a strange land. She also indirectly partakes of Voss's crisis during the journey. The mysterious fever running alongside Voss's crisis in the journey may naturally be read as a symbolic correlation. How can we interpret this mysterious fever that grips Laura? Should it be merely taken as a physical illness? Maybe not! The co-extension of Voss's crisis leading to his death and Laura's illness may be considered as a telepathic relationship. It is this characteristic relationship that helps them to discover their own identity in the context of this mysterious land. In this way Laura progresses towards self-knowledge. In the beginning of the novel, she appears a woman absolutely dispassionate about Australia. But gradually she unlearns her earlier preconceived ideas and learns to perceive the true essence of the land. This permeates through her being and she considers Voss not as a concrete being but as a part of Australian history. Perhaps she recognises herself as a significant witness to this great event.

4.3.4 Theme of Suffering in *Voss*

In the epigraph to his first novel, *The Happy Valley*, Patrick White used a quotation from 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 the suffering." (David Marr, p. 311). This quotation implies his assertion of suffering as a distinctive element in his novels. *Voss* particularly substantiates the nature of intense suffering. Though it fictionalises the story of a megalomaniac explorer, yet the major concern of the novel seems to be the complex virtue of suffering. David Marr in his biography of Patrick White has tried to relate this question of suffering with the novelist's personal life. He therefore comments: "White saw himself as a sufferer: as an asthmatic, homosexual, foreigner and artist." But he was at the same time aware of the fact that he had never been exposed to the worst misery: poverty. Moreover his intense friendship with Lascaris saved him from absolute loneliness. But Patrick White considered suffering as a constructive and positive principle of life. David Marr comments once again: "Yet he saw suffering as a force in his life, making him what he was, making us as we are. For White, pain is a force of history, shaping men and events". White once said: "I have always found in my own case that something positive, either creative or moral, has come out of anything I have experienced in the way of affliction". As Marr points out, "behind the suffering of Johann Ulrich Voss, in the Australian desert lay the pain White experienced writing *The Tree of Man*. Both men were explorers: Voss on horseback, crossing the continent and White at his desk trying to fill the immense void of Australia."

Voss's journey across the desert is also a progress through suffering. He tries to explore the nature of the void present in Australia. In other words, he investigates the true spirit of the infinite. But this quest involves a series of suffering experienced in his inner self. As a result of his journey, he seems to be submerged in a sea of futility. He suffers from the pain of unrequited love. Voss suffers from unrequited love in the sense that he proposes to Laura through a letter wherein he writes, "I have ever been aware of your friendliness, and since interest in our welfare, as well as the great value I myself place upon our connexion, however, slight this may present itself at first, and subordinate in the plan of life that fate has prepared for each of us." He also goes on to say, "... In the mean time, also, I would ask your allowance that I may write to your Uncle, Mr. Bonner, with necessary formality, for your hand," (Chapter 6). But he is able to confess his feelings for her and to write to her about this only when he is already at Rhine Towers. Laura responds by saying that she is "temporarily confused: and wonders whether "two such faulty beings (can) endure to face each other, almost as in a looking-glass? Have you foreseen the possible outcome? And have you not, perhaps, mistaken a critical monster for a complaint mouse?" She concludes by saying that they "may pray together for salvation" and that she "shall intercede as ever" for his "safety and your (his) happiness," (Chapter 8). It is only after this exchange of letters that they begin to feel each other's presence and are united in

spirit though miles apart. But we know (after having read the novel) that they will never really meet each other again and that Voss will die eventually in the great Australian deserts. In his letters to Laura he mentions their love for each other saying, "That we should love each other, Laura, does at last appear inevitable and fitting, as I sit here alone in this immense country." He also refers to her as his wife, "Do I take too much for granted my dearest wife?" he thinks that distance has in fact brought them closer. He writes again, "you see that separation has brought us far, far closer. Could we perhaps converse with each other at last, expressing inexpressible ideas with simple words?" He concludes by saying, "I send you my wishes, and venture by now also to include my love, since distance has united us thus closely. This is the true marriage, I know. We have wrestled with the gristle and the bones before daring to assume the flesh," (chapter 8). But Laura does not receive this letter. We will not go into details on why this unfortunate incident takes place. Instead we shall move on to discuss the dissension within the party that Voss suffers from. The dissension within Voss's group occurs soon after the strong currents in the river wash the raft with their supplies away. We do know that Voss is aware of the fragmentation that is about to occur when he asks Palfrey,

"I want you to be candid with me. Are you of Judd's party?"

"Of Judd's party?"

"Yes. Judd is forming a party, which will start off from me sooner or later."

"I will not split off," said Palfreyman, sadly. "I am not of any party."

The discontentment and anger finally leads to a confrontation between Voss and Judd with Judd saying that he is no longer under the leadership of Voss and that he wishes to go home leading, "anybody that is of like mind". Except for Jackie, the "black fellow", Le Mesurier, Harry Robarts and Voss, the rest of the party turn around and try to go back home, Palfreyman has however died during the course of the dissension and is spared the decision of continuing with Voss or turning back. We are aware of the fate that befalls the dissenters and Voss's party too. Voss also suffers as a result of the lack of faith between the whites and the indigenous aborigines of Australia as Jackie betrays them. The Aborigines capture Voss and his party, Le Mesurier cannot take the tension of impending doom and rather than die in the hands of the Aborigines, he slits his throat and kills himself. Jackie has turned traitor and the only people now left are Harry and Voss. Harry dies while a captive and his putrefying body is thrown into a canal while the Aborigines sing a weird song, and Voss has to await death. Jackie is chosen to kill Voss and the boy, "was stabbing, and sawing, and cutting, and breaking with all his increasing, but confused manhood, above all breaking... When Jackie had got the head off, he ran outside followed by the witnesses, and flung the thing at the feet of the elders..." The other members of the party that had deflected too suffer in the midst of the vast desert and die eventually. Both Jackie and old Dugald epitomise the lack of faith between Voss and the Aborigines that Voss suffers from. But, as David Marr points out, "through his suffering in the desert, Voss conquered his pride." With the extinction of self-pride, he comes to achieve self-knowledge through suffering. This idea of suffering brings us closer to the Christian principle of self-knowledge. Thus Laura says: "perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind."

4.3.5 Religion in *Voss*

Patrick White's works are generally accepted as "marking a new departure in its concentration on the inner spiritual crisis and in individual religious experience", (Dorothy Green). His works are pervaded by Christian imagery and explore the various dimensions of the (Christian) doctrines of **Grace and Salvation**. Moreover as Amos Wilder and Charles Glicksbury comment, he realised the fact "that to be meaningful and relevant in the context of the contemporary world, the religious stance must necessitate an involvement with, not a withdrawal from the realities of ordinary human existence". So what Patrick White did was preach not any coherent set of orthodox doctrines but belief in the existence of a transcendental order that

more or less impinges directly on the life and destiny of the individual human being who must therefore work out a satisfactory relationship with and adjustment to that order. That is evident in our very own novel *Voss* as well. The religious spirit that exists in *Voss* (in keeping with that in his other novels) is also very responsive to nature, - the birds, beasts and flowers as also to the world of other fellow human beings. White has the unique capacity to draw imagery from the natural world and then to use that to dramatise his transcendental vision that once again reinstates the sense of its significance to the religious spirit. So what we have here is a professed religious order that is extremely responsive to nature and that which creates a religious order / vision with its imagery, while at the same time, creating the magic of the religious vision. We shall not go into too many details here. Just as in the previous section we did not go into details on the *theme of suffering*, we shall not try and analyse the minute details on religion in *Voss* too. What we shall do at this stage is to give you a line of thought that will make you question what you have read in the novel and try and analyse it, so that a clearer picture emerges before your eyes and the words on a page are not just words but have a story to tell. We also know that at this stage of our discussion on *Voss*, you are equipped to do some thinking for yourselves. Having said this we shall continue with our next and last unit of this Block.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we looked at two significant aspects of the novel. It must be remembered that this novel is history as well as fiction. At the fictional level, we may locate a distinct pattern of story telling, making use of all kinds of usual characteristic components. But it also conceals a pattern of history. Patrick White has carefully historicised Australian nature and shows man's heroic struggle with this unfavourable topography. Again in the process of this struggle, he comes to rediscover himself. The distinctiveness of this land helps him to identify himself. In this way, a true perspective of history has been created in *Voss*.

4.6 GLOSSARY

Indigenous: It refers to the native, aboriginal people and their culture

Topography: Detailed description, representation of natural features of a land.

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. How does nature and men confront and coalesce in Patrick White *Voss*?
2. Do you think that the problem of identity in Patrick White's *Voss* foregrounds a more important question of self-discovery?