

"باتريك وايت – أيقونات الهوية الأسترالية"

مدرس دكتور: غفران عبد حسين

قسم اللغة الإنكليزية/كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية /جامعة كربلاء

البريد الإلكتروني Email : gufran.a@uokerbala.edu.iq

الكلمات المفتاحية: باتريك وايت، الأدب الأسترالي، النفي (المنفى)، الهوية، رواية "فوس"، رواية "حافة من أوراق الشجر"، أدب الرحلات (السرد الرحلي)، الاغتراب.

كيفية اقتباس البحث

حسين ، غفران عبد، "باتريك وايت – أيقونات الهوية الأسترالية"،مجلة مركز بابل للدراسات الانسانية، آب 2026،المجلد:16، العدد:8.

هذا البحث من نوع الوصول المفتوح مرخص بموجب رخصة المشاع الإبداعي لحقوق التأليف والنشر (Creative Commons Attribution) تتيح فقط للآخرين تحميل البحث ومشاركته مع الآخرين بشرط نسب العمل الأصلي للمؤلف، ودون القيام بأي تعديل أو استخدامه لأغراض تجارية.

مسجلة في
Registered
ROAD

مفهرسة في
Indexed
IASJ



Lecturer: Ghufran Abd Hussein

English Department, College of Educations for Humanities, Kerbala University

Keywords : Patrick White, Australian literature, exile, identity, Voss, *A Fringe of Leaves*, travel narrative, alienation.

How To Cite This Article

Hussein, Ghufran Abd , “Patrick White – Icons of Australianness”, Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies, Auguts 2026, Volume:16, Issue8.



This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

المخلص:

تناقش هذه المقالة رواية باتريك وايت من منظور تمثيله الدقيق والعميق للتجربة الأسترالية. وبصفته كاتبًا متجذرًا بقوة في التقاليد الأدبية، فقد تفحص وايت عددًا من الأعراف والتقاليد الشكلية؛ حيث انتقل من مراجعة التاريخ (المنهج المراجعاتي التاريخي) إلى الهجاء والساخر، وصولًا إلى التأمل الذاتي في عملياته الخاصة بابتكار الخيال الأدبي. وتتميز أعمال وايت بالإفراط الشعري، الذي يستخدمه لنقد المجتمع الأسترالي ومكانة الفنان الفرد فيه. كما يستكشف هذا المقال، المعنيّ بالهوية الأسترالية لباتريك وايت، مفهوم الإقليمية في الأدب، وكيف يرتبط الكاتب بكل من الأدبين الإنجليزي والأسترالي معًا. وبرزت رواية "فوس" (Voss) كعمل محوري يقدم إعادة تجسيد عميقة وقوية لأستراليا، مستكشفة مفهوم العزلة الفردية وتعقيد الواقع المتصور. أما رواية "حافة من أوراق الشجر" (A Fringe of Leaves)، الصادرة عام 1976، فهي عبارة عن أدب رحلات تدور أحداثه خلال العهد الفيكتوري، وتعد مقارنات بين إنجلترا

الفكتورية ونظيرتها القبيعة في الجانب الآخر من الأرض (أستراليا). وبفضل منظورها المعاصر، تتيح لنا "حافة من أوراق الشجر" فحص البنى الاجتماعية، فضلاً عن المقارنة بين الرؤى الفلسفية المختلفة للعالم، والاغتراب. تُشكّل الفترة الزمنية التي كتب فيها وايت أعماله (حوالي 70 عامًا) إشكاليات عند محاولة تصنيفه ومواءمته مع التراث الأدبي الأسترالي. ولم تبدأ أستراليا باكتساب بعض الشهرة في مجال تراثها الأدبي إلا في السنوات السبعين الماضية تقريباً.

Abstract. This article discusses Patrick White's novel with respect to his nuanced representation of Australian experience. As one deeply rooted in the tradition of literature, White has examined a number of formal conventions. He moved from a historical revisionism through satire to self-reflection about his own process of creating fiction. White's works are characterized by poetic excessiveness, which he uses to critique Australian society and the position of the individual artist. The essay dealing with Patrick White's Australianness will explore the concept of regionalism in literature and how he is bound to both English and Australia literatures. "Voss" stands out as an important work; it provides a deep, powerful recreation of Australia, examining the concept of individual isolation and the complexity of perceived reality. "A Fringe of Leaves," (1986) is a travelogue that takes place during Queen Victoria's time period. It draws comparisons between Victorian England and its antipodean counterpart. By virtue of its contemporary perspective, "A Fringe of Leaves" enables us to examine social structures in addition to contrast different world views. The time period in which White wrote his works (approximately 70 years) creates problems when trying to classify and align him with the Australian literary tradition. It was only about the past 70 years that Australia started to claim some degree of notoriety in terms of its literary tradition

1. Introduction: Challenging Australianness

In her essay *A Small Place*, Caribbean writer Jamaica Kincaid refers to the British colonists who "should never have left their home, their precious England," and turning into England any unknown territory they stepped upon, Australia included. Conquest led to "the destruction of people and land," erasing all the peculiar traits of each native culture (Kincaid, 1988, p. 24). It is a complex process that anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains as "*consensus gentium* (a consensus of all mankind)" – by which he means "some things that all men will be found



to agree upon as right, real, just, or attractive and that these things are, therefore, in fact right, real, just, or attractive.” (Geertz, 1973, p. 38)

England, as a component of Europe, will be taken as the reference culture, and those “things” that Geertz mentions must necessarily be European, therefore English. All human beings share a common essence, fundamental and truthful, which is evident to Western Europeans but not so visible in the case of the *Other*. It is this theoretical framework that explains the particular position of Patrick White, the Australian Nobel Prize winner, as described by one of his biographers, “a child of the Empire, born in London to Australian parents,” who was to remark that “... ‘is in my blood – my fate – which is why I have to put up with the hateful place when at heart I am a Londoner’” (Marr, 1992, p. 75).

George Lamming, discussing the condition of the exile, is very trenchant about it when he considers the universal dimension of this character because “We are made to feel a sense of exile [...] Sooner or later, in silence or with rhetoric, we sign a contract whose epitaph reads: *To be an exile is to be alive.*” (Lamming, 2003, p. 12, emphasis added). These are the keywords of the early post-colonial discourse. Patrick White stands for a kind of exile that does not simply mean a geographical dislocation but a permanent exile of the mind, which is the plight of the post-colonial writer. Moreover, in the particular case of Australia, it is the plight of the white settler who is denied full realization of the notion of “home.” However, it draws from this “handicap” – which would typically be an alienating factor – the stimulus to create an exceptionally politically committed work.

As early as 1958, Patrick White referred to Australia as “the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions” (White, 1958, p. 38), to which – though reluctantly – he had decided to return after his European exile. The consideration of Patrick White’s Australianness prompts an exploration of the complex terrain of regionalism in literature and the author’s affiliation with English or Australian literary traditions. In term of how we can see dynamic presentation of a single writer operating in a legitimate literary group established on intrinsic merit, without any plea or narrow critical views, there are several differences in how criticism is applied to a writer outside of an established literary tradition versus one inside that same established tradition.

Criticism of a writer outside of that established literary tradition would likely be different than that of their English counterpart. To look at this



question will ultimately involve looking at what function criticism plays and how standards may be used differently for Australian writers compared to European or American writers. This may create arbitrary limits on the creative process. While White's major novels bring native concern to universal proportion, he also explores identity and the complexities of Australia; thus, he fits with other highly regarded author whose experience is successfully translated into artistic endeavours. These authors translate their own experiences into a work of art and organize those experiences in order to create symbols of something much larger and more inclusive.

The time period in which White wrote his works (approximately 70 years) creates problems when trying to classify and align him with the Australian literary tradition. It was only about the past 70 years that Australia started to claim some degree of notoriety in terms of its literary tradition. A great deal of the writing produced during this time supported and perpetuated many common perceptions and myths concerning Australian culture, including egalitarianism, an assertive nationalism, the cultural iconography of "mateship" as a cult of male superiority, and an almost ubiquitous distrust of hypocrisy. White uses satire to reveal this dream world by comparing it to the realities of modern-day Australia. His use of satire is further enhanced by his understanding of the reality that created the basis of these myths. Additionally, White knows that he is using satire to compare this dream world to the reality that exists within the works of writers that have been purportedly propagating these myths.

2. Voss: Search for Salvation

The complex novel "Voss" published in 1957 belongs to the broader category of discovery and exploration literature. This broad category includes the Roman historian's work "De Bello Gallico," the writing of Renaissance writers such as Hakluyt ("Principal Navigations") and authors writing during the 20th century, including Joseph Conrad, William Golding ("Lord of the Flies"), and Saul Bellow ("Henderson the Rain King").

White was heavily influenced by the journal entries of Australian explorers who explored the interior of Australia from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Specifically, White drew upon the journal entries of the Prussian explorer Ludwig Leichardt (1813-1848), whose journal entry "Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia, From Moreton Bay to Port Essington A Distance of Upwards of 3000 Km, during the years



1844 and 1845" provided much information to the world regarding the new land. In addition to these influences, the title character, Johann Ulrich Voss, has been given an additional layer of uniqueness due to being seemingly inspired by the German writer/scholar Johann Heinrich Voss (1751-1825).

One unique aspect of White's use of historical accuracy and plausibility is used as a background for the three major themes of the novel: finding salvation; understanding suffering; and understanding one's will. Departing from conventional structural techniques and devices, White allows his vision to be represented throughout the entire body of the novel. White describes this vision as if it were music.

Similar to a musical composition, the relationship between Laura and Voss takes on a counterpoint quality when they disagree but ultimately develop into a fugue-like format, as each continues to repeat, elaborate and expand upon various themes. White also described how he developed both Voss and Laura Trevelyan: "how to make an unpleasant, mad, fundamentally repulsive man, attractive enough, and to find out how a woman with a fairly strong streak of priggishness could be appealing." (Marr, 1994, pp. 108)

Structurally, the plot development of Voss is quite simple: The story begins with Voss visiting his patron to ask permission to go on an expedition across Australia. During the visit to his patron's home, Voss meets Laura Trevelyan, his patron's niece. Throughout the course of the book there are several instances in which Laura and Voss see each other. In each instance, prior to leaving on his journey to the interior of Australia, Voss leaves Laura behind in Sydney. The physical distance that develops between Laura and Voss is large over time; however, the spiritual communication that exists between Laura and Voss increases exponentially while he is on his journey. Ultimately, Voss dies; at which point Laura becomes a school teacher. When illustrating how the relationship between Laura and Voss progresses White effectively examines contrasts between the two social groups of which he writes. These social groups include: (i) society in Sydney during the 1840s -- primarily focused on Laura as its centre; and (ii) the group that consists of members of an expeditionary team led by Voss. Both Laura and Voss have an influence on their respective social groups. As a result, White uses this influence of Laura and Voss on their social groups to establish the framework of the structure, form and meaning of "Voss".



The first time they meet sets the tone for how they will relate to each other, since they both recognize certain similarities. They are also both inwardly turned-inward people who have been made aware of their own mediocrity in life, so they find comfort within themselves through intense mental reflection. This inner existence becomes a form of spirituality for both of them, and manifests itself in a rational way through Laura's rejection of Christianity - "a defection" from the religion in which she was raised - and now she finds it difficult to articulate this change: "She could not remain a convinced believer in that God in whose benevolence and power she had received most earnest instruction[...] she was become what, she suspected, might be called a rationalist[...] the fuzz of faith suffocated her." (White, 1960, pp. 3). She does not know the focus of her pride or rationalism; Laura's reaction mirrors the typical response from any educated and sensitive young woman who has seen the great voidness of the society she lives in.

Conversely, Voss' pride lies in the Australian expedition across the Australian continent. Unlike Laura, he feels "sufficient in himself" (Ibid., pp. 17), and an insatiable need for self-realization. Voss wants his name to be associated with the vast expanse of land he dedicated his life to; if his body were buried by the very ground he named, he would like it to occur in a remote area where no one would feel nostalgia or a sentimental feeling toward him after his death. He disdains sentimental admiration and love; he believes himself to be whole.

Although Laura has developed enough independence to support her own development, she does not have a basis for spiritual fulfilment. After contemplating several ways to improve herself, she believes herself ready to move out of the lush world of pretences into the desert of suffering and reward (Ibid., p. 80); When she tells Voss, "You are my desert!" (Ibid., p. 94) this sentiment is amplified. Her entry into Laura's close-off world begins a downward journey; there may be more devastating consequences for her than those experienced by Voss and his party during their expedition.

White develops figurative language to portray the trajectory of Voss and Laura after their physical separation. White makes analogies between the successive phases of Voss's expedition and the complex although personal struggle that occurs in Laura's mind. Laura's personal struggles are intensified by the actual conditions experienced by Voss and his party hunger, thirst, illness, miles upon miles of stone, sand, desert sun which



provide the fundamental imagery that Wright uses to convey these struggles.

A parallel emerges between Laura's illness and Voss's experience in the Australian desert: Laura is attended by a doctor who treats her with leeches, while Voss is surrounded by Aborigines who will shed his blood. The comet in the night sky of the antipodes ultimately delivers both of them from this time of trial, as suggested by the French scholar Hubert Teyssandier, "The comet, which is seen both by Laura in Sydney, as a blaze of celestial light, and by the Aborigines in the outback, where it figures the original deity, "The Great Snake, the grandfather of all men provides the linking image between the two forms of spirituality, thus brought together in the oneness of a vision which integrates two cultural worlds and unites Voss and Laura." (Teyssandier, 1995, p. 73)

The two achieve a spiritual or mystical union in realms where physical union is impossible, transcending the physical world's constraints. White's use of this device reveals a subtle irony. Only two of their letters reach their destination, underscoring the impossibility of a transcendental union between Laura and Voss. This emphasizes not the senders' union at a transcendental level but rather the futility of such a union. White's moral vision is rooted in two worlds of self-projection and fantasy, juxtaposed yet in opposition.

Laura emerges as the one who comprehends the essential truth about Voss—his dependence on others, a vulnerability more significant than the possibility of denial by some of his companions. In contrast, Voss, whose motivations for the expedition align with his self-perception, stands on the opposing end of the spectrum because "Every man has a genius, though it is not always discoverable. [...] But in this disturbing country...it is possible more easily to discard the inessential and to attempt the infinite". (White, 1960, p. 38)

What at first looks like an expedition of discovery turns into a search towards the refinement of the self: Voss's statement, "To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself" (*Ibidem*), proves that he does not aim at the final liberation of the self; his purpose is the total enslavement of everything else to it. Rather than a recipe for freedom, his statement thus becomes a proclamation of selfish nihilism:

"‘I dunno what I am,’ said Harry and looked for help. Many disturbing and opaque thoughts began to move in his clear mind. What am I? What is it necessary to be? He was now faced with the terrifying problem of his



own category. ‘You are perhaps subtler than you know.... Your future is what you make it,’ said Voss, ‘Future is will.’ (*Ibidem*, pp. 39)

It is all because the nihilist cannot destroy his own will – the final aim of his liberation. Laura understands it very well when she says, “This expedition of yours is pure will,” to which Voss reminds her of the restraints imposed by his expedition companions. However, he does not offer an acceptable explanation of why he does not walk into the desert on his own: “It would be better,” he added abruptly, “that I should go barefoot, and alone. I know. But it is useless to try to convey to others the extent of that knowledge” (*Ibidem*, p. 74). White is not very specific about whether Voss’s last act may be interpreted as a failure or a triumph and whether his death is a victory over selfishness and hate or just a logical end of a self-appointed martyr.

Laura’s claim that “when a man is truly humbled when he has learned that he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming so” (*Ibidem*, p. 411) is essentially an account of the meaning of Voss’s humility. However, in one of his dreams, she told him, “It is the woman who unmakes men, to make saints” (*Ibidem*, p. 201). Thus, for Laura, the deconstruction of Voss and his metamorphosis into something different is a teleological process, an advance towards sainthood, which Voss, in his dream, distrusts. For Voss, it is the state of duality itself in which the making and the unmaking exist in constant tension, which is significant, and his humility is not a confession of his worthlessness but an acceptance of the irreconcilables in his nature.

3. A Modernist View

To change the register, White’s 1957 novel’s publication made it suitable for a modernist reading. We are faced with a modernist mapping of the wasteland, as it tracks inferiority and focuses on subjects measuring the distance between the self and a sense of destiny now lost. Literary Modernism is meant to offer a new understanding of spiritual affirmation – as it seems to be the case of Voss. By adopting a somewhat didactic approach for a moment, we can detect several themes pertaining to Modernism that apply to White’s novel.

It is, first and foremost, a breakdown of the established social norms of a settler society. As such, Voss’s expedition was financed by well-established members of the settler community, and it should not have included the convict Judd, who, against all expected rules, was eventually promoted to a leadership position. Another striking example is the Rose episode: the pregnant servant is not only accepted to stay in her middle-class employer’s family during pregnancy but, defying all rules, Laura



adopts the newborn baby. Similar examples of breaking the norms in Jackie's behavior towards the Aborigines exist.

The British (imperial) well-established and immovable class system does not work in the penal colonies of Australia. Its collapse is seen in the plight of the convicts who survive the flogging and transcend their condition. At the same time, an aristocrat like Brendan Boyle at Jildra – the frontier between two worlds and the meeting point between two opposing systems of thought, culture, and nature – lives in utter poverty at the “last hospitality civilization would offer them” (*Ibidem*, p. 167). There is also a permanent sense of alienation that permeates the movements of the main characters. If Laura is alienated from society and her family, Voss is equally alienated not only from the settlers' society but also from his homeland (Germany) and his language (German), to which he resorts in his moments of solitude as he writes his poems in German. Even when the expedition across the continent is almost stranded in the middle of nowhere, Voss prefers to be alone, away from any human contact, and the Aborigines Jackie and Dugald carry with them the burden of a new consciousness. The primary imperative of the expedition is to impose white ideology on the ideologically uncontaminated space of Aboriginal Australia.

Voss's project is hindered by the indigenous culture's resistance to advancing European consciousness. The reason for Jackie's execution of Voss is to “break the terrible magic that bound him remorselessly, endlessly, to the white men” (*Ibidem*, p. 12). The destruction of Voss's letters by Dugald resists the infringement of all the existing norms of European logo-centric culture in the Aboriginal world still living in prehistory. As Jonathan Friedman deftly notes in “Narcissism, Roots, and Postmodernity,” “the problem with Western modernity is that its individualism tends to erode the moral values that render the entire project of modernity a genuine possibility.” (Friedman, 1994, p. 187)

The setting White chose for his novel – the vacancy of the Australian outback – and the impressive emptiness of the Interior metaphorically mirror the moral vacuum experienced by his characters. This allows White to exercise his modernist enterprise in ways that allow for his metaphysical intentions. In the vacancy of the outback, Voss's search for spiritual power invokes the modernist struggle to resituate the subject in a position of centrality that overrules the performative crisis of modernity. Patrick Williams, in *Modernism and Empire*, has observed that modernism “takes the triumphalist experience of imperialism into the extremes of self-consciousness, discontinuity, self-referentiality and corrosive irony, whose formal patterns we have come to recognize as the



hallmarks of the modernist” (Williams, 2000, p. 22). Modernism is thus advancing a profound critique of both its origin and its destination. In White’s novel, Voss “was sitting in the middle of nowhere [...] too fantastical a nature, too expressive of his nothingness” (White, 1960, p. 210).

Australian society establishes Voss as a historical exhibit rather than trying to understand the psychology that justified such an enterprise. White was interested in invoking a setting suitable to his exploration of the condition of a modern man adrift without a moral compass. The Australian outback was a metaphor for the psychological wilderness he was interested in charting. According to Kay Schaffer, Voss “imagines Australia as a fallen garden ... and can slide into a persona for the mythical Patrick White imagined as Australia’s Prodigal Son.” Voss’s story is one of “cultural decay,” covering one’s “search for the lost soul of a nation” and identity, denying racial, class, and gendered differences” (Schaffer, 1998, p. 86).

White’s representation of Voss’s identity as hindered by his marginalization favors the representation of difference. He is not interested in providing a historical dimension even though he struggles against “the restraints of a colonial Australian past” (Schaffer, 1995, p. 163) and provides an example of the appropriation of Aboriginal presence by Western interpretation. What saves him from the charge of misrepresentation is White’s condemnation of his white characters’ assumptions about the Aborigines. The Aborigines are used as signifiers of the unconscious, leaving White open to charges of modernist elitism by engaging only the most reductive correlatives with primitivism.

There are, however, differences that separate White from the facile modernist association of the primitive with the elemental, which in turn led to the assumption that the primitive had access to a clarity unavailable to the obstructed sensibility of the modern subject. In the case of Voss, the author uses the primitive as a manifestation of specific hostile psychic forces to underline Voss’s failure to recognize them as independent individuals. The indigenous characters are construed from a psychological point of view, which sees the forces of emotional chaos as autochthonous and fundamental to an understanding of the modern psyche, which, however, cannot fully conceive of itself. The primitive, indigenous Australian in Voss is rendered not only within the framework of the faulty attempt of Modernism at an all-encompassing view; according to the rhetoric White associates with Voss himself leads to the assimilation of the primitive in Western myth, it also suggests that the white man is equally available for assimilation.



In his seminal essay, “Translating and Resisting Empire: Cultural Appropriation and Postcolonial Studies,” Jonathan Hart comments on the changing assessment of cultural appropriation that connects with White’s purpose in *Voss*. Referring to Homi K. Bhabha and Salman Rushdie, Hart mentions the merit in the idea of cross-cultural representation establishing an “in-between identity,” and “The best way to look at cultural appropriation is as an interaction between changing cultures over time and not simply as a static transaction between two sides” (Hart, 1997, p. 156).

Voss’s perspective is, nevertheless, dominant in the novel in that each character, irrespective of race or gender, is essentially merely an addition to the protagonist’s inner psychological world, and all contribute as different perspectives of the same psyche, which is destined to overthrow itself. In this overall picture, the Aborigines are the most deadly example. Voss is powerless and isolated, and he can neither benefit from nor interpret the perspective of the other; his word has no power.

His power acquires a spiritual dimension and does not fit into any framework. It is meant to be spiritual and is not conducted within the framework of any social precedent. He expects to be understood and obeyed by the divine right with which he has invested himself. Surprisingly, Voss approaches the blacks with the most significant deference, assuming the attitude of a gentle god. White registers this vanity as the flawed and naive courage of both the imperial and the modern subject expecting to dissolve boundaries before he has negotiated nature and, more importantly, expecting them to be constitutive of the self. What happens, then, is that the white man’s psychic boundaries become suddenly permeable; he is not able to create divisions or parameters with his language, and Voss is left open and vulnerable in a relationship of silence that effectively cancels his autonomy:

“Where do I belong, if not here?” he asked. “Tell your people we are necessary to one another. Blackfellow white man friend together.” “Friend?” asked Jackie. The word was twangling in the air. He had forgotten its usage. Now the tribe began to murmur. Whether asking, arguing, or advising, it was not clear. Jackie had grown sulkier. His throat was full of knots. “Blackfeller dead by white man,” he was prompted to say at last. (White, 1960, p. 359)

It is a message that obsessively followed Patrick White for the rest of his life, prompting him to become a militant for the rights of the Aborigines.



4. *A Fringe of Leaves* – Patrick White Recreating Australia

Voss has been widely recognized as the crowning achievement of Patrick White in re-creating Australia – her land and the people (white settlers and black Aborigines alike), and in presenting a separate Australian identity. This novel can rightly be termed a study of man and depicts the alienation of the individual from society and the nature of ‘reality’ perceived behind appearance in a much more complex way. It is a “human epic” which portrays the power of Man in all his naked glory and the study of a human being with a strong desire to be ‘God’ and lead ‘ordinary’ mortals to salvation, but in the process, the human being is destroyed by nature and other men. Here, pride is humbled by external sufferings, and the realization of the real spirit is obtained.

Nearly twenty years after writing his novel on the German explorer Johann Ulrich Voss, White again turned to Australian past history. Although he was technically using the fictional genre of the historical novel, actual historical events were not his prime concern; White found “historical reconstructions [...] too limiting” and had always avoided “writing them because of the strictures they impose on the imagination” (Marr, 1994, p. 446). Long before the “Great Australian Emptiness” became a defining component of the Australian imagination, the seas surrounding it had already developed their mythology. An English Newspaper in 1787 viewed the project of the convict settlement in the antipodes with sarcasm. The opinion was that two-thirds of the convicts would reach no other land than “the bottom of the Sea,” one of the many accounts of sinking ships along the Australian coast, the *Stirling Castle* episode, has been conferred an almost mythic dimension. Moreover, Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves* is just one step away.

The novel, just like *Voss*, is based on a true story concerning Eliza Frazer, a Scottish woman who was shipwrecked on the coast of Queensland on 22 May 1836, where the Aborigines captured her. She was eventually rescued by an escaped convict and returned to Sydney. However, there were two versions of the story concerning Eliza Fraser’s rescue: one is the authenticated story told by John Graham, a convict member of an official rescue party. Graham spent insufficient time alone in the bush with Eliza to justify any claim of impropriety. Alternatively, there is the fictitious account of another convict, Bracefell, who had been living with Aborigines for some years and claimed to have led Mrs. Fraser overland to Moreton Bay, where to hide their sexual liaison, she threatened and intimidated him so that he escaped back to the bush.

Eliza’s story inspired Australian painter Sidney Nolan to produce a series of pictures that White used as a starting point for his novel. Nolan’s



painting represents an imagined Eliza, faceless and naked, picking up sticks somewhere in the Australian outback. The woman looks almost savage, animal-like, and vulnerable, surrounded by the thick and practically impenetrable bush, lacking any attributes of Western civilization, and at the mercy of untamed nature – Patrick White’s model for his protagonist.

Two reasons justify the tremendous public appeal of this true story: first, the hint at alleged obscenities the Englishwoman had been subjected to by the savage Aborigines and the appeal to an imperial action to impose British civilization on the ignorant natives. In White’s version of the story, Ellen Roxburgh, a young Cornish woman, and her invalid husband Austin travel to Van Diemen’s Land (present-day Tasmania), then an Australian colony, in the early 1830s to visit Garnet, her husband’s brother and the black sheep of the family. After witnessing the atrocities in the penal colony, they set out on a ship for their return voyage to England. On their return voyage, the ship hits a reef, and all the passengers are forced to escape in lifeboats. They spend a long time in the boats, and the characters of the passengers are revealed, particularly Austin, who shows a strong survival instinct. When they land on Fraser Island, they are attacked by Aborigines, and many of them, including Austin, are killed.

The Aborigines rescue Ellen, but she is stripped of her clothes and enslaved. (The fringe of leaves of the title is the fringe she makes to cover herself.) A convict eventually rescues her, Jack Chance, who escorts her through the dangerous coastal territory south to the settlement’s outskirts but refuses to accompany her further and returns to the wilderness. Ellen returns to “civilization” significantly transformed by the three experiences in her life: the encounter with Garnet in Van Diemen’s Land, the stay with the Aborigines, and Jack Chance. She settled in the Moreton Bay prison colony (present-day Brisbane) to become an advocate for the oppressed.

This condensed plot summary might give the wrong impression that the Aborigines are negative characters, which is valid to a certain extent. However, Ellen is not unsympathetic to their situation and their proximity to nature. Similarly, Jack Chance is portrayed sympathetically, and the comparison with the sometimes stultifying life of “civilization” is given. However, the universe is not ordered the way we think. The novel clarifies the distinctions between men and women, whites and blacks, the convicts and the free, and the English colonists and the Australian settlers. The contrast between Ellen’s rural Cornish background and the English middle class she has married into is also highlighted.



White's novel develops around the three essential elements that helped shape the Australian identity: taming the inhospitable nature, the convict past, and the unavoidable presence of the Aboriginal peoples. In *A Fringe of Leaves*, Patrick White uses the traditional literary form of the travel narrative and shapes his novel according to some rules. It starts with preparing for the journey back to civilization and discovering that Australia already belongs to a relative past. Set in the age of Queen Victoria, the novel plays upon the profound similarities between Puritan society in Victorian England and its supposedly exotic counterpart in the new world at the antipodes. The point of view of the outer narrator is modern.

The story's starting point is Australia, the penal settlement, the place devoted to punishing those who have transgressed the taboos meant to ensure the safety of Victorian society back in Europe. Significantly, both civilizations and countries are remembered through a series of flashbacks that stage the crucial alterations that have taken place in the heroine's destiny. Thus, a relatively banal and traditional character becomes the instrument of a postcolonial analysis of both societies. Essentially, *A Fringe of Leaves* is based on several oppositions: (1) nature against civilization; (2) the instinctual self against the social self; (3) Ellen, the Aborigines and the escaped convict against the colonial white society; and (4) the bush against the city.

The novel's female protagonist embodies all these oppositions, and her image enhances the possible intimate relationship between the two worlds – the white settlers' expanding community and the diminishing Aboriginal world. In this particular place, the protagonist's captivity in the natives' tribe is a liberating experience: hers is a journey from the 'civilized' world of the metropolitan center to the primitivism of her captors. Indigenous Australian culture is introduced as neither a reminiscence of a past long forgotten and idealized nor a condemnation of a lower level of social achievement but as an insight into the most fundamental reactions of human beings to unexpected circumstances. These two cultures are impossible to reconcile, while the native culture cannot find any system to protect itself from the influence of Western civilization. White's novel can easily accommodate the reconciliation between the two cultures, resulting in a utopian dream that would integrate certain forms of expression that are unaccepted in our society.

In Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*, we re-enact the opposition between the desert and the city. Similar concerns exist in White's previous writings, such as the contrast between social forms and other



realities, which he later extended by placing his outcast characters in the wilderness outside Western civilization.

The novel provides an insight into the condition of two distinct social groups: one is the convicts' community, the outcasts of civilized Britain, and the undesired refuse of the Empire, which Ellen discovers during her visit to the colony of Van Diemen's Land; the other one is the community of Aborigines, the tribe which rescued Ellen and, by stripping her of all the insignia of civilization, brought her close to nature and gave her the chance to discover herself. Convicts do not enter directly into Ellen's Van Diemen's Land experiences but provide pictures and an ambiance of imprisonment. There is one telling glimpse of prisoners in a road gang: "In contrast to the tanned cheeks and furiously mobile faces, the closed eyes and white eyelids gave the prisoners that expression of unnatural *serenity seen in the blind*, and which makes them all but removed from the life around them" (White, 1976, p. 75, emphasis added). This "serenity seen in the blinds" is echoed in Ellen and in her two male companions, Austin and Garnet, as they drive past: she feels relief, more than commiseration, that the convicts do not "open their eyes", as the men are immersed in their own pasts.

To a certain extent, Ellen senses a certain kinship with these convicts who – despite her hope that "freedom sometimes exchanges abstraction for reality" (*Ibidem*, p. 112) – cannot possibly survive in the wilderness of Van Diemen's Land, and experiences mixed feelings of disgust, anger, despair for all those "the human souls condemned to torments on this island on which they too had the misfortune to find themselves" (*Ibidem*, p. 113). Ellen experiences a complex process of transgression, a passage from civilization to the untamed wilderness of Fraser Island, where she (un)willingly turns native.

In the Aboriginal society on Fraser Island, Ellen encounters an apparent social primitivism. White provides a picture of Aboriginal society, seen through its daily life, which he depicts in realistic detail. She is once more a servant, at times a tortured slave, where living is reduced to the daily chores of the tribe, amounting to scraping (often literally) subsistence from the land. Interestingly, when White wrote his new novel, native cultures – not only on Fraser Island but all over Australia – were almost extinct. The writer preferred to go to the sources, and he even spent time on the island gathering first-hand information from storyteller Wilf Reeves, who was interested in preserving the traditions of the native Butchulla tribe.

The Aboriginal version – which White freely adapted and developed upon in his novel was that the white survivors of the shipwreck had been



warmly welcomed by the natives as reincarnated spirits, the surviving white woman being accepted as a member of the tribe until taken away, back to civilization, by some other whites.

However rich in details of Aboriginal life, the Aborigines' society, as depicted in *A Fringe of Leaves*, is primarily an artistic rendering and the result of White's imagination. The daily routine of tribal life on the island contains several unsettling realistic details, including the condition of women as second-class tribe members or the flea plagues seen as reasons for the tribe's next nomadic move. Irrespective of adverse reactions triggered by such accounts, White cannot be accused of any adverse feelings regarding the Aborigines, as he adopts a similar tone both for the presumably uncivilized Aboriginal community and for the civilized settlers' colony. The protagonist's point of view is that of a Victorian woman held in captivity by the natives who do not have the physical time to develop more intimate relationships with them – such as learning their language and understanding their way of life. The difference is noticeable when Ellen manages to overcome all the stereotypes and prejudices of her time and experiences moments of elation and happiness among her black captors. She expresses a favorable, balanced, and even fond opinion of them.

5. Conclusions

White's fiction finds its strength in contemporary Australian history. They deal with such issues as nationality and ethnicity, aboriginality, gender, power, colonization, and postmodern culture – sufficient reasons to allow Mark Williams to place Patrick White among the writers mainly concerned with the fundamental issues of post-colonialism: Janet Frame, Wole Soyinka, and Wilson Harris “who manage to reflect the full complexity of the postcolonial situation without adopting either the Eurocentrism of Naipaul or the ethnic nationalism of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. At the core of White's concern as a writer is the complexity of cultural inheritance in colonized countries like Australia.” (Williams, 1993, pp. 166-167)

White's literary exploration delves into moments that transcend time, emphasizing epiphanies in individual lives. White's thematic focus is an effective blend of temporal and historical elements with deeply personal and timelessly relevant aspect. White employs a fluid form of genre in his novels; therefore, he uses strategies to contend with the issues created by using historical material.

White's novels are highly debated and interpreted by critics, and many have found White's work to be provocative and contrary to traditional



view. In addition to the relationship between literary language and landscape, White's work also addresses

the relationship of history and identity that invites post colonialist analysis. White's theme of how isolation affects societal perspective, and how we treat others (i.e. abusive) in works like "A Fringe of Leaves", demonstrate White's concern with the complexities of marginalization. Through his portrayal of immigrant life in Australia and the limitations of traditional forms of language when adapting to new cultural environments, White creates a dynamic of centre and periphery cultures. In the context of Australian Literature, White's contributions reflect upon regionalism and the struggle of belonging to both the English and Australian Literary Traditions.

Although White's work falls within a framework of established literary traditions, White's works challenge if the method of criticism should change when criticizing writers working outside established literary traditions. Patrick White's novels contain theme of identity, complex Australian reality and the individuals' feelings of being alienated from their own society through the inclusion of indigenous factors into a universally applicable dimension. White's exploration of salvation, suffering and the will in "Voss" represent a shift away from conventional structural means to emphasize the substance and quality of the author's vision.

Patrick White was a major contributor to Australian Literature however; his legacy will forever be tied to debates about how "Aussie" he was. Although White was a British born writer living in Australia, there were many Australians who perceived him in a paradoxically way. Much of this paradox stemmed from White's unwillingness to fit into what he considered to be the stereotypical views of Australians. As someone who advocated for the use of humility and imagination, White's inability to accept the traditionalism and pragmatism that are typical of Australian culture created a complicated connection to his fellow Australians. While White experienced much success outside of Australia, it is evident that he was never able to receive recognition as a patriot within his own country. The tension above is evidence of the interconnected relationship between an artists' identity and their societies expectations.

However, despite the struggles that White faced, he undoubtedly had an impact on Australian Culture. His stories brought to light several issues affecting Australia today; specifically, the contribution of new immigrant



groups to the national identity. White also addressed social issues such as sexual freedom and tolerance which helped break down societal barriers and create a more accepting view of human relationships. Additionally, through White's exploration of otherness in his narratives, he challenged previously held ideas of what was acceptable by Australia, therefore creating a re-examination of what we consider normal in our society.

Overall, through the manner in which he wrote about these important issues, White made significant contributions to the cultural conversation in Australia. As a result, he has left behind a lasting impression on both the intellectual and literary landscape of Australia. The body of work produced by Patrick White exemplifies the ability that literature possesses in order to challenge the status quo and provide a platform for a broader spectrum of people and cultures to be represented in a given society.

Works Cited

- Friedman, Jonathan. 1994. "Narcissism, Roots and Postmodernity", in *Cultural Identity and Global Process*. London, SAGE.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man". In: *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books Inc., pp. 33-54.
- Hart, Jonathan. 1997. "Translating and Resisting Empire: Cultural Appropriation and Postcolonial Studies" in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, eds. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, pp. 137-169.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. 1988. *A Small Place*. New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Lamming, George. 2006. "The Occasion for Speaking" In: Ashcroft et al., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (2nd ed.). London, Routledge Press.
- Marr, David. 1992, *Patrick White: A Life*. Sydney, Vintage.
- Marr, David. 1994. *Patrick White: Letters*. Sydney, Random House.
- Schaffer, Kay, Ian J. McNiven and Lynette Russell, eds. 1998. *Constructions of Colonialism: Perspectives on Eliza Fraser's Shipwreck*. London and New York, Leicester University Press.
- Schaffer, Kay. 1995. *In the Wake of the First Contact: The Eliza Fraser Stories*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Teyssandier, Hubert. 1995. "Cultural interweavings in Patrick White's *Voss*", in *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines*, no. 8, Montpellier, Presses universitaires de Montpellier, p. 67-75.
- White, Patrick. 1960. *Voss*. London, Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- White, Patrick. 1976. *A Fringe of Leaves* (London, Jonathan Cape Ltd.
- White, Patrick. 1958. "The Prodigal Son" in *Australian Letters*, Vol 1, no 3, pp. 37-40.
- Williams, Mark. 1993. *Macmillan Modern Novelists: Patrick White*. London, Macmillan.



“Patrick White – Icons of Australianness”

Williams, Patrick. 2000. “Simultaneous Uncontemporaneities: Theorizing Modernism and Empire.” in *Modernism and Empire*, Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby, eds. Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, pp. 13-38.



Journal of Babylon Center for Humanities Studies: 2026, Volume: 16, Issue: 8

