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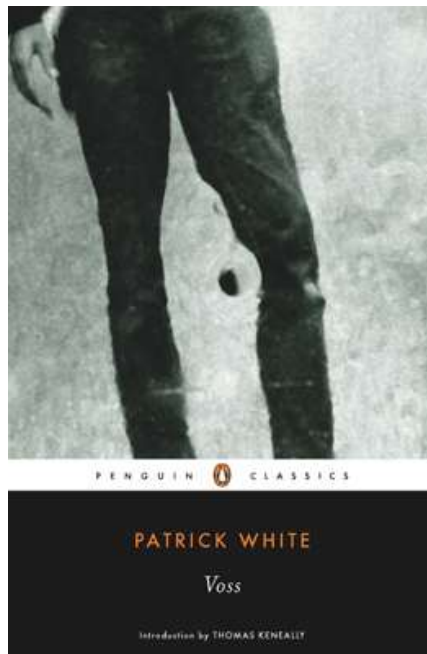
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## Quest Motif in Patrick White's Novel *Voss*

B. Siva Priya, M.A., M.Phil.



### Abstract

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B. Siva Priya, M.A., M.Phil.

Quest Motif in Patrick White's Novel *Voss*

Patrick White (May 28, 1912- September 30, 1990) was the first Australian to receive the Noble Prize for Literature. Though Patrick White writes on many themes to suit his purpose, his novels revolve mainly around one major concern, the quest for self. Quest plays a vital role in knowing the true purpose of life. The reward of quest is gaining the deeper understanding of one's True Self and the discovery of a new and different way of being. Quest can be fulfilled only through prolonged suffering and by experience. Patrick White's central characters, male and female, typically struggle through several layers of experience and finally achieve their identity. This paper entitled Quest Motif in Patrick White's Novel *Voss* presents how Voss, a German explorer, undergoes a quest for self and finally achieves his identity.

**Keywords:** suffering, humility, salvation, fulfillment

### **Patrick White, a Nobel Prize Novelist**



[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1973/white-autobio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1973/white-autobio.html)

Australian Literature, like all great literatures, is dynamic. It is the response of creative writers to the condition of life in Australia. Patrick White (May 28, 1912- September 30, 1990) was an Australian author who is widely regarded as one of the greatest novelists of the twentieth century. He was the first Australian to receive the Noble Prize for Literature. Patrick White is concerned with three major themes in his novels: the obvious and influencing isolation of the individual, the quest of an individual

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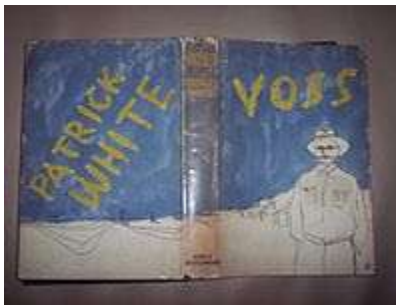
for identity, integrity and fulfillment, the ironic contrast between the elite outsider and the philistine society. Though Patrick White writes on many themes to suit his purpose, his novels revolve mainly around one major concern, the quest for self.

### **The Quest for Self**

Quest plays a vital role in knowing the true purpose of life. The reward of quest is gaining the deeper understanding of one's True Self and the discovery of a new and different way of being. Quest can be fulfilled only through prolonged suffering and by experience. Patrick White's central characters, male and female, typically struggle through several layers of experience and finally achieve their identity. This paper entitled Quest Motif in Patrick White's Novel *Voss* presents how Voss, the German explorer develops a quest for self and finally achieves his identity.

*Voss* is based upon the life of the nineteenth-century Prussian explorer and naturalist Ludwig Leichhardt who disappeared during his expedition into the Australian desert in 1848. Later he is found dead in the Australian desert.

*Voss*



Patrick White's *Voss* (1957) is the product of the common experience of human suffering and isolation. Adrian Mitchell in an article entitled "**Patrick White: in pursuit of doubtful onion**" considers *Voss* as White's "crowning achievement" (61). White here presents the quest for illumination and the search for knowledge of the true nature of mankind. The setting of the novel, Colonial Australia is used as the climatic metaphor of

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the human psyche. It is the launching ground for a mythical voyage of exploration into the vast space of the human self.

### **The Story**

In the novel, Johann Ulrich Voss, a German explorer goes through a process of self-realization, and in the end experiences illumination, realizing his own true nature. Johann Ulrich Voss, a German, sets out on an expedition in 1845, to explore the uncharted territories of the Northwest of Australia:

He was an uncouth, to some he was a nasty man. (26)

Voss is sponsored by Mr. Bonner, Mr. Sanderson and Mr. Boyle. He is accompanied by Palfreyman, an ornithologist, Frank Le Mesurier- a young man who is looking for the purpose of life, Harry Robarts- a physically strong simple English boy, Turner- a drunkard, Judd, an ex-convict, Ralph Angus, a landowner, Dugald, the old man, and Jackie, the younger one. Voss has met Mr. Bonner's niece, Laura Trevelyan and he has struck up a strange friendship with her. During his expedition, Voss writes to Laura, proposing marriage, and she replies with a letter of acceptance.

After travelling for a few days, Dugald complains about his old age and decides to return to Jildra. Frank Le Mesurier, one of the members in the expedition thinks deeply about life and writes poetry secretly in a notebook.

Everyone in the expedition is sick and weak and the compulsory rest during the rain returns some of their strength. After the rain, the party emerges from the cave, in spring. They encounter a group of aboriginals who might have stolen their equipment. As Palfreyman goes across to them to ask about the equipment, they stab him. After Palfreyman's funeral, Judd announces his decision to break away from the party and return. Turner and Angus join him.

### **New Direction for the Story**

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Voss moves ahead with Harry Robarts, Le Mesurier and Jackie. He has a vision of Laura with her hair shove off. In Sydney, Laura falls ill. She keeps constantly thinking about Voss. Jackie has disappeared. When Le Mesurier finds that Voss cannot do anything for him, he cuts his own throat, though Voss trusted in God. Harry dies of exhaustion in the hut of twigs. Voss grows closer to Laura in his mind. As the aborigines compel Jackie, he kills Voss with the very knife Voss has given him. In Sydney, Laura's fever breaks and simultaneously she cries because Laura guesses that something must have happened to Voss:

'O God', cried the girl, at last, tearing it out. 'It is over. It is over'. (395)

At Potts Point, Colonel Hebden who helps Laura in finding Voss, introduces to Judd that Laura is Voss' friend. Judd tells Laura that Voss has "left his mark on the country" (443). The blacks talk about him to this day. Judd finally concludes that, in the honest opinion of many of them, Voss "is there in the country, and always will be" (443).

### **Voss – Aggressively Romantic and Unrealistic about Human Limitations**

Voss, the hero, a half-crazed German explorer is aggressively romantic and unrealistic about human limitations in the world. He is possessed with too noble a conception of himself, resisting even a momentary lapse into normal humanity. He has rejected the choices of salvation and fulfillment offered by religion and society to every human being. He bluntly rejects the healing forces of love and faith in realities of life and weakness. He is ambitious of achieving the Absolute. He considers himself to be God. In the words of Judd:

He was never God, though he liked to think that he was. (443)

Though he does not have much spiritual faith, Laura offers to pray for him at all times. He worships with pride more than with God. He himself agrees:

... I worship with pride. (89)

To him exploration is inevitable. He wishes to endure everything that comes across in his life. By his endurance he thinks that he can assert his ambition throughout the torturous journey in the desert. For Voss, the long journey in the desert is a “search of human status” (393).

Voss has admiration for the Australian desert which also conjures up the German nostalgic feelings of his childhood. He feels the inevitability about his exploration. Replying to Frank Le Mesurier, a companion in the expedition, Voss states:

‘Yes’, answered Voss, without hesitation. ‘I will cross the continent from one end to the other. I have every intention to know it with my heart. (33)

So faithful and honest Voss is. His shocking immersion in his private world brings him daemonic powers towards self-humiliation and the humiliation of their relations.

### **Super Human Qualities**

Voss assumes superhuman qualities and expect others to admire him in the process of realizing his ambitions. For Voss, humility is detestable, repentance, a weakness. He himself says:

Ah, the humility, the humility! This is what I find so particularly loathsome. (89- 90)

He claims that one’s will is his destiny. He asserts himself in his reply to Laura, on an occasion:

‘Your future is what you will make it. Future’, said Voss, ‘is will’. (68)

### **Inner Exploration and Transformation**

Voss undergoes future transformation on his personality. His inner exploration is metaphorically represented by the terrific journey through the desert. The influencing relationship between the protagonist and the other characters, especially the love-link

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between Voss and Laura act on the rapidly shrinking selves of Voss and lead him through a series of epiphanies to the final denouement.

### **Gradual Change**

The love relationship between Voss and Laura brings a gradual change in the life of Voss. Voss chooses to be the leader of an expedition financed by Mr. Bonner, a rich businessman. It is at this time he happens to meet Laura Trevelyan, cousin of Mrs. Bonner and falls in love with her. Voss initially does not see any physical beauty in Laura. Nor she is attracted to him physically. On the contrary she is, rather, detested by his physical ugliness like thin body, ugly hairs and beard and even awkward gait in peculiar trousers. But the most important irony is that both of them are awakened to each other's spiritual beauty though rather slowly. They meet only four times, and for very short periods, hardly enough to establish the kind of bond that they seem to share. Yet they feel married to one another. The communication between them is founded on a fine blending of telepathic awareness and dream sequences.

### **Prophetic Voice**

All four meetings take place within the first quarter of the novel. Laura recognizes Voss' exceptional gift at their very first meeting. While the Bonners discuss the expedition, voicing their doubts about his knowledge of the terrain, Laura states emphatically:

It is his by right of vision. (29)

This prophetic voice that Laura has in the first part of the novel is borne out by later events. During their second meeting at a picnic, while Voss talks of his expedition, she tells him that she has realized that his expedition is a 'pure will'. Their third meeting takes place during the party which the Bonners give for the members of the expedition. When Voss and Laura attend the meeting arranged by the Bonners, they happen to meet each other privately on the terrace in the dark. It is exactly there when they try to understand each other's deeper problems and emotions. Laura tells him, "You are so vast

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and ugly, I can imagine some desert with rocks, rocks of prejudice, and yet, even hatred. You are isolated. That is why you are fascinated by the prospects of desert places” (87-88). But at the same time she says, “ I am fascinated by you... ‘You are my desert’” (88). Likewise Voss senses in her a deep spiritual passion in spite of her apparent atheism, “You are an apostle of Love masquerading as an atheist for some inquisitorial purpose of your own” (90).

### **Relationship, Metaphor**

Thus both of them feel a spiritual attraction for each other, which is confirmed by physical intimacy. They have understood and sympathized with each other. Their wavelengths have been almost the same although Voss has not declared his love for her yet. Voss reads aloud from the book of German poems that Mrs. Bonner gives him and though she does not understand the language, Laura feels she has united with him.

Voss wishes to know what her imagination would make of him. She describes his character to him with remarkable accuracy: his isolation, his predilection for selfishness, even hatred. There is no doubt that she catches him on the raw:

Do you hate me, perhaps, asked Voss, in darkness (88)

Laura’s answer describes the precise nature of her role, both with regard to Voss himself, and with regard to the action of the novel:

I am fascinated by you, laughed Laura Trevelyan with such candour that her admission did not seem immodest. ‘You are my desert’. (88)

This metaphor of the desert that Laura imposes on Voss lies at the heart of her double vision. While she explores her personal desert, which is the spirit of Voss, he traverses the physical desert, taking her with him into its harsh interior. She is thus able to share his journey and its sufferings. He does not know this yet, but she seems to be aware of it. Significantly, in his evocations of her presence in the desert, there are often water images: rain, a river. She is ultimately his life-giving oasis.

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During one of his conversations with Laura, Voss admits:

The humility, the humility: this is what I find so particularly loathsome. My God, besides is above humility. (90)

His declaration is a turning point for Laura, for Voss' overweening pride awakens her pity and love and she realizes the overwhelming need to save him. Her faith, which had been wavering, returns to her, secure now in having a positive goal towards which it must function. She tells him:

I will learn to pray for you. (90)

They meet one last time, the morning when he leaves for the expedition. They do not speak to each other but there is an instant of wordless communication.

For an instant their minds were again wrestling together and he experienced the melancholy pleasure of rejecting her offered prayers. (112)

### **Role of Prayers**

These prayers are a significant leitmotif in the novel. Moments before his death at the hands of the aboriginal boy, Jackie, Voss is to "taste" these very prayers, and the nourishment they give him till the end.

At the very start of the expedition, while he is in a jubilant mood, singing aloud, the thought of her prayers haunts him. As the expedition gets under way, Voss and Laura establish a communication of which the tangible links seem tenuous, but it is unmistakably powerful in essence. The nature of this communication is beautifully conveyed through the image of the butterflies which Voss sees, while camping in the desert. Voss and Laura communicate in many ways. They write letters; the fact that these letters do not, all of them, reach their destination that does not affect the course of action.

This is because other avenues of communication are open to them. They share dreams

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and because of their telepathic dimension, these dreams ultimately take on the force and clarity of visions, and intersect reality. Their love in separation grows more and more intense than it is in union. Voss begins to dream about Laura when he reaches Newcastle.

The woman with the thumping breasts, who had almost got trampled, and whose teeth had been currying black horsehair, began to shout: Laura, Laura... Laura is smiling. They are sharing this knowledge. (140)

As Voss seems to be obsessed with Laura, his desire to communicate with her becomes irresistible. He therefore writes a letter to her,

Dear Miss Trevelyan, do not pray for me, but I would ask you to join me in thought, and exercise of will, daily, hourly, until I may return to you, the victor. (153)

He expects from her intellectual and spiritual companionship. In that letter, Voss asks Laura to get permission from her uncle for her hand in marriage. Its tone is flattering, it describes her as “a companion of strength and judgment” (153), but she is not easily swayed. Her reply is honest and sincere. She feels that they owe their mutual recognition of each other to the fact that they are both arrogant. Her condition for acceptance is unequivocal:

Only on the level, let it be understood, that we may pray together for salvation, shall you ask my uncle to accept your intentions, that is, if you still intend. (186)

Voss is gladdened by the word “together”. His first two dreams of Laura have been vague and inconclusive, but this time, after he receives her letter, he has a dream which has explicit sexual connotations:

Now they were swimming so close they were joined together at  
The waist, and were the same flesh of lilies, their mouths,  
Together, were drowning in the same love-stream. (187)

He tells her, in this dream: “I do accept the terms” (188), but she is stronger than he:

You are in no position to accept. It is the woman who unmakes  
Man, to make saints. (188)

Voss feels very happy. His second letter, which is a reply to hers as well as to this dream, tells her that he has acquired some degree of humility. He calls her “my dearest wife” (216) and is confident that she is with him, sharing his dream life:

You see that separation has brought us far, far closer (216).

But Laura never reads this letter, since the old black, Dugald, who carries it, tears it up on the way. Laura continues to bear him company through his journey, reassuring and protective, a guardian spirit. He feels her with him all the time.

Voss has one last dream of her before the final section opens. In this section, real life and dream are so closely interwoven that they flow smoothly into each other. The last dream is also the last evidence of separateness. It occurs after he has read Le Mesurier’s poems and is exhausted.

She came to him, and held his head in her hands, but he would  
not look at her... So Laura remained powerless in the man’s  
dream (297-298)

The mutual understanding between Voss and Laura involves as much critical evaluation as self-scrutiny. Both of them are aware of their own arrogance and hatefulness, which together helps them achieve a sympathetic reapprochement and kinship. That is why Laura in her reply to Voss’ letter says:

Arrogance is surely the quality that caused us to recognize each other...  
So Mr. Voss, we have reached a stage where I am called upon to consider  
my destroyer as my saviour! (185).

### **Laura's Realization of Her Frailty and Consequence**

The letter shows, it is the arrogance of Voss, which shocks Laura into an awareness of her own frailty. That is why; the destroyer of her egotism happens to be an evangelist as it were for her. Her respect for his spiritual superiority slowly matures into love for him over a long stretch of time. The emotion of love at once helps Voss to tone down his arrogance and Laura to bolster up her diffident self.

Laura who is not able to meet Voss physically, tries to seek some consolation by taking care of Rose Portion's illegal child Mercy on humanitarian ground. For a while she enjoys the pleasure of vicarious motherhood in the company of the child. But she is not allowed by the circumstances to continue to have that pleasure. Her need for the emotion of love makes her confess it in her letter to Voss, which she could not send at all to him. Gradually she suffers from a brain fever. She enters into a state of delirium. Her intense love and commitment to Voss express themselves in her delirious talk, "You need not fear. I shall not fail you. Even if there are times when you wish me to, I shall not fail you" (358). It is indeed interesting to know that what Laura promises to Voss seems to be telepathically heard by him in spite of a great geographical distance between the two.

### **Telepathic Vision and Redemption**

When Voss is riding with the members of the expedition, he happens to have a telepathic vision in which he sees Laura riding a horse along with him.

‘I shall not fail you’ said Laura Trevelyan, ‘Even if there are times when you wish me to, I shall not fail you’. (363)

A little later he asks her, "You will not leave me then?" (366), to which she answers, "Not for a moment ... Never, never" (367). The communication between the two lovers takes place spiritually and telepathically which perhaps offer them a new strength to bear the pain of physical separation.

Laura's love for Voss is also clearly seen at the time when Laura at her sick bed says, "that man is so shoddy, so contemptible, greedy, jealous, stubborn, ignorant. Who will love him when I am gone? I only pray that God will" (386).

It is this relationship that saves Voss from losing his human identity. Laura is intellectual and is provided with a rare insight into life. She realizes the rocklike ambitions of her counterpart and prepares herself to save him even risking her own identity. She senses the arrogance of Voss who is a step closer than her towards damnation through intellectuality. She converts herself into a love-force to heal him and redeem his soul from the fires of hell.

In Sydney, Laura performs the rituals of spiritual union between herself and Voss, away in the desert towards harmony and fulfillment. This she does through the restoration of love, humility and faith in Voss. Ironically enough, though Voss rejects love, in the beginning, it is the visions of love, in which Laura participates as a faithful companion that brings him closer to realization and thus nearer to salvation.

Towards the end of the novel, Judd praises Voss to Laura that Voss is more than a man because he helps to reduce the sufferings of men in the expedition:

He would wash the sores of the men. He would sit all night with them when they were sick, and clean up their filth with his own hands. (443-444)

### **Forever Laura Loves**

Even after twenty years, when people erect a statue of Voss in memory of his sacrifice, Laura refuses to believe in his death. She says, "I am convinced that Voss had in him a little of Christ like other men. If he was composed of evil along with the good, he struggled with that evil. And failed". (445) She further believes that Voss is not dead. But "he is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be

written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it” (448). Laura’s love for Voss is truly sublime, as it has transcended the physical and geographical barriers.

### **Trust in God**

In the beginning, Voss considers himself to be divine, but towards the end, he feels that “he was ready to meet the supreme emergency with strength and resignation” (393). When all the members of the expedition leave except Harry Robarts, Le Mesurier and Voss, Le Mesurier asks Voss about his plan. Voss replies:

‘I have no plan’, replied Voss, ‘but will trust to God’. (379)

Voss is a man who firmly believes that “to make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself” (34). He stands and sticks firmly to his words till the end.

### **Frank’s Poems – The Process of Self-revelation for Voss**

Voss’ relationship with his companions in the expedition is diverse. Palfreyman’s suspicion of his own faith is mocked by Voss. This gives lessons of humanity to the leader of the exploration even in his death. Voss learns the strength and value of humility from this honest ornithologist. Frank Le Mesurier, who is also the alter ego of Voss, carries the evil demon of ambition. This keeps Voss’ conscience alert and mirrors the disastrous future of Voss’ ambition. It is through his symbolic world that Voss recognizes himself and the destructive demon inside him. Judd, the ex-convict is seen by Voss as a potential rival. His physical strength and rationality and logic are seen as a threat to Voss’ leadership. This reminds Voss of the human limitations. Besides these, there are Turner, Harry Robarts, Sanderson, Boyle, who all educate Voss in the futility of isolation. This brings Voss nearer to the realization of his human inheritance. In fact, Frank Le Mesurier is the conscience keeper of Voss.

Frank’s prose-poems give a shocking self-revelation to Voss. Frank shares the common daemon with Voss. He is inspired to write and record the progress of Voss’ journey from the beginning of the ambition to the ultimate possible destiny. In the poem Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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named “Conclusion”, Frank records the four phases of Voss’ quest story. The first section of the poem describes how man turns himself into God through sheer intellect and ambition:

Man is King. They hung a robe upon him, of blue sky. His crown was motten. He rode across his kingdom of dust, which paid homage to him for a season, with jasmine, and lilies, and visions of water. They had painted his mysteries upon the rock, but, afraid of his presence, they had run away. So he accepted it. He continued to eat distance, and to raise up the sun in the morning, and the moon was his slave by night. Fevers turned him from Man into God. (296)

This is the picture of Voss at Sydney with all his restlessness and ambition. Voss assumes divinity with all the dignity and superiority of a leader of the historical expedition.

The second section records the arrogance of the man who acknowledges his own divinity:

I am looking at the map of my hand, on which the rivers rise to the North-east. I am looking at my heart, which is the centre. My blood will water the earth and make it green. Winds will carry legends of smoke; birds that have picked the eyes for visions will drop their secrets in the crevices of rock; and trees will spring up, to celebrate the godhead with their blue leaves. (296)

Voss is shown at the height of his arrogance as he starts from Sydney by the repeated use of “I” (23) and the self-centred approach. At the time, when Mr. Bonner questions Voss whether he consulted the map, Voss replies arrogantly that he himself “will first make it” (23). He feels that he can “lead an expedition into the interior...” (34).



**Brigalow (acacia) Tree, also known as Umbrella Thorn Acacia**

In the third section of the poem, there is the transformation of man by accepting “the visions of love” (296) and the power of humility:

Humility is my brigalow, that must I remember: here I shall find a thin shade in which to sit. As I grow weaker, so I shall become strong. As I shrivel, I shall recall with amazement the visions of love, of trampling horses, of drowning candles, of hungry emeralds. Only goodness is fed. (296)

This shows Voss’ acknowledgement of the powers of love and humility. It covers his journey from Rhine Towers to Jildra and into the desert.

The fourth section is the important and prophetic one, since it projects Man as accepting his own humanness and praying to God for redemption:

O God, my God, I pray that you will take my spirit out of this my body’s remains, and after you have scattered it, grant that it shall be everywhere, and in the rocks, and in the empty waterholes, and in true love of all men, and in you, O God at last. (297)

Voss protests against this poetic estimate of his own character and destiny, since he is not yet convinced of his “successful” failure. But his self-assertion and self-pride

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are deeply affected after this self-revelation. He accepts love and humility in the visions of love but his “will” (297), the “royal instrument” (297), is yet to be freed from the delusions of divinity. The silent Frank writes poems which strike and lead Voss towards self-recognition.

### **Explorer Finally Explores**

*Voss* presents an ecstatic fulfillment and humbled soul of an individual by persistent torture. It prophesies the ominous future of the scientific civilization. Behind the romantically exaggerated aspirations of a maniacal man, Patrick White exposes modern man’s existential crisis. In a way, Voss is the summation of man’s intellectual aspirations, doubts, convictions and the extremity of self-pride in isolation. White’s intention is to exemplify Voss as an answer to this prevailing negation, turbulence and doubt. The grotesque figure of Voss, whose destructive expedition is like a pagan ritual, and whose ironic ambivalence embodies the restlessness of rational wisdom, represents the extreme phases of the individual’s alienation.

Governed by his glorified selfhood, Voss, the mystic, starts his quest with a devastating false step. In the beginning as an exalted romantic individualist, Voss could evade the real by seeking refuge in the unassailable anatomy of his self. For him, the laws of religion, and moral and spiritual conventions are mere outside forces acting on man to devalue his stature. But, in the end, the same man moves towards a position of deep humility, accepting the mystery as not only inevitable but also redemptive.

Through suffering and his love for Laura, Voss intends to reveal his true nature. Achieving knowledge through suffering is emphasized by Laura at the end of the novel:

Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind. (446)

Voss, the German explorer suffers humiliation in the desert before he is illuminated. He finally exemplifies the statement:

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When man is truly humbled, when has has learnt that he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming so. In the end, he may ascend. (387)

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in an article entitled “**Commonwealth Literatures: Themes and Variations**” that appeared in *Two Cheers for the Commonwealth* concludes with a tribute to Patrick White’s *Voss*:

... there is no doubt that this Australian novelist has created in *Voss* a character endowed with elemental human dignity, and with powers of leadership and endurance quite out of the common. In this novel, both eternities- the immensity without and the immensity within- are fully explored and are finely fused into a reality that we experience everyday as life and love and suffering and death- and life’s renewal and life everlasting. (43)

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B. Siva Priya, M.A., M.Phil.  
Assistant Professor of English  
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women  
Sivakasi- 626123  
Tamil Nadu  
India  
[sivapriyabaskaran@yahoo.co.in](mailto:sivapriyabaskaran@yahoo.co.in)

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