

## CROSS-CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN PATRICK WHITE'S VOSS

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### ABSTRACT

*In the dynamic landscape of postcolonial studies, the idea of hybridity has emerged as a fundamental and critical proposition. Eminent postcolonial theorist Homi K Bhabha has an everlasting signature on the postcolonial discourse. Bhabha declares it as an inevitable ramification of colonialism, showcasing the convoluted interplay of cultures and identities in societies shaped by colonial legacies. Hybridity takes birth from the vigorous encounters between the colonized and the colonizer. It challenges the conventional binary constructs of cultural identity. The people who embody this dual encounter are the living bridges between the cultural and genetic legacies of both sides of the colonial divide. Therefore, the hyphenated identities become an explicit antithesis of the essential thought and a symbol of resistance, subverting the unbending categorizations and hierarchies imposed by colonial powers.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Cross-Cultural Encounters*

### INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic landscape of postcolonial studies, the idea of hybridity has emerged as a fundamental and critical proposition. Eminent postcolonial theorist Homi K Bhabha has an everlasting signature on the postcolonial discourse. Bhabha declares it as an inevitable ramification of colonialism, showcasing the convoluted interplay of cultures and identities in societies shaped by colonial legacies. Hybridity takes birth from the vigorous encounters between the colonized and the colonizer. It challenges the conventional binary constructs of cultural identity. The people who embody this dual encounter are the living bridges between the cultural and genetic legacies of both sides of the colonial divide. Therefore, the hyphenated identities become an explicit antithesis of the essential thought and a symbol of resistance, subverting the unbending categorizations and hierarchies imposed by colonial powers. According to Bhabha, hybridity is, “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of cultures, and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” in the postcolonial discourse (158). He further defines it as a “sign of productivity of colonial power, it is the name for strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority)” (159). Cultural hybridity, rooted in literary and cultural theory, operates as a valuable vantage point from which we can examine the complex web of influences that colonial antagonism and binary paradigms have on the construction of cultures and identities. It is considered as a form of superior cultural intelligence, derived from its inherent potential to synthesise diverse cultural elements and effectively negotiate differences.

The novels of Nobel prize winner Patrick White express the anguish and experiences of those who are uprooted and devoid of everything. White's novels project the constantly changing trajectory of personal development and self-awareness amongst Australian people. His writings probe into the potential barbarity which can be found within the continent. His thoughtfulness towards isolation and man's search for meaning is reflected in his treatment of his literary works as a means to promote a sense of kinship within diverse communities. This is further justified when he proclaimed, "It is not art for art's sake, but art for people's sake." His interpretative potential reinvigorates in his novel, *Voss*, which exemplifies the cross-cultural imagination. This paper explores the nuances of hybridity in the postcolonial context, its implications for the reconfiguration of identities and its role in dismantling conventional understandings of culture and heritage. In the seminal work, *The Empire Writes Back*, Harris addresses the theme of imperialism in the novel. He writes, "the ways in which certain 'persistent intuitive elements' ... conspire to undermine the imperialism which governs the surface texture of character and event". (Ashcroft et al. 150) In the novel, White delves into the human psyche, with an explicit focus on the people residing in the interior of the Australian continent, addressed as Aborigines. The land of Australia has been considered home by the indigenous people for many centuries. But, the European explorers maliciously called it 'terra nullius' in order to defend the legitimacy of their colonial ventures, even when they were fully cognizant of the land's native population. Wendy Morgan propagates that the term, enabled to think of that 'empty land as theirs for the taking; to assume it had no peoples, no history or stories; and to push the Aboriginal peoples to the margins of the whites' country, whites' history and stories, even though these peoples had inhabited the land successfully for tens of thousands of years. (ix)

*Voss* presents the journey of Aboriginal settlement while using the concept of 'psychic indigenization' as the motif of his journey to the Australian wilderness. He explores the psyche of aborigines with a different perspective. The adverse weather conditions and the unforgiving circumstances are positioned as parallels to the human psyche and vices. The novel is rooted in the life of the 19th-century Prussian explorer and naturalist Ludwig Leichhardt. The two protagonists of the novel are Johann Ulrich Voss, a German explorer, and Laura, a young woman who finds herself orphaned and new to the colony of New South Wales. The story is set in the year 1845 and embarks on a harrowing journey as Voss assembles a group of settlers and two Indigenous Australians for a daring cross-continental expedition. While the novel encompasses the physical trials and tribulations of its characters, its true strength emerges from the passions, insights and inevitable fates of the explorers. The novel intricately delves into the multifaceted character of Voss, creating a narrative that resonates with profound depth and complexity. It illustrates the interactions between the whites and the Aborigines from the coloniser's point of view through multiple incidents depicted by Voss during the expedition. Although Australia is a haven for settlers, the Aborigines had to endure a variety of challenges, from inclement weather, arid desert and primitive and untamed conditions. Ingmar Bjorksten records these challenges, "when there is a catastrophic shortage of water, when flies find their way into every exposed part of the body" (57). These trials and tribulations make Patrick White consider the Aborigines as victims. Moreover, the expeditions carried out by the whites further exacerbated their pain and deeply frightened them, owing to the oppressive behaviour which jeopardised the lives of the local people.

The novel opens with the meeting of two protagonists in Mr Bonner's house in Sydney. Mr Bonner is a merchant who is sponsoring Voss's expedition. Both the protagonists hail from contradictory backgrounds; Voss is of German origin, whereas Laura is from England but has been living in Australia for quite some time. Despite her years of residence, she does not identify the country as her native land. In contrast, Voss, a German by birth, embraces the continent as his

own country. Fascinatingly, their relationship blossoms through the dreams where they share their feelings for each other. The expedition team consists of Australian settlers, including Harry Roberts, Frank Le Mesurier, Palfreyman, Angus and Turner. These individuals travel beyond their usual routines and familiar aspects and expectations of their own selves while pushing themselves to the outermost boundaries of their very nature. However, the failure of this expedition is a forgone conclusion for most of these explorers. Besides the white travellers, Mr Boyle introduced two aboriginal guides: Jackie and Dugald to the expedition group. The crucial role of black advisers and guides started to surface soon after the initial settlement in Australia. In the early inland explorations, the proficiency of Aboriginal guides over Europeans became quite evident and essential to their accomplishments. The European groups found it infeasible to embark on an expedition on that land by themselves without any native guidance. Consequently, official travels, as well as smaller private groups and even cattle drovers who didn't possess a thorough familiarity with the land that the Aboriginal people did, started engaging the Aboriginal guides.

Following the footsteps of his ancestors, the journal of Leichhardt illustrates his assertion of white authority as he starts to pay homage to different benefactors through the naming of places, rivers and hills. This naming exhibits a total lack of concern and acknowledgement of the land ownership within the Aboriginal community. This also reflects the resolute imperialist conviction of the explorers. Despite witnessing the aborigines, they still went on to consider the continent as terra nullis and further viewed it as conducive for the habitation of white immigrants and assigning white labels. Parallely in the novel, when Mr Bonner questions Voss whether he has checked the map, he gives a patronizing reply that he will personally create the map. The interactions between the aborigines and the explorers occur in a place which is untouched by colonial rule, thereby the indigenous people still hold their autonomous status. Consequently, the power and proud intrusion of the whites soon became meaningless as it was challenged by the autonomous aboriginal society. With each step taken deeper into the wild heart of the island, the increasing dependence of the whites on the indigenous people becomes increasingly clear. As the Aboriginal community gains strength, the exploration team begins to disintegrate.

As the storyline proceeds and the group ventures deeper into the pristine landscape, the readers could feel a slow and systematic increase in Aboriginal influence, counterbalancing the white presence in their territory. The rebalance is witnessed in the first encounter when the aboriginal guides neglect Voss's intention to initiate a communication. However, Voss's affiliation with the whites hinders him from openly harbouring his affection and respect for these aborigines. He would talk to them only when he is not surrounded by his fellow explorers, "In other circumstances, Voss would have liked to talk to these creatures... But in the presence of Brendan Boyle, the German was the victim of his European, or even his human inheritance" (170). However, soon the situation changes, and both his guides stop acknowledging Voss's requests, "The explorer would have liked to talk to these individuals, to have shown them suitable kindness, and to have received their homage. But they disappeared. Once or twice he called to his escorts, who had decided, apparently, not to hear. (186-87)

The unsettling intensity with which the Aboriginals consistently observe the explorers can be witnessed in various interactions. More often than not, they embody the very essence of the land and reflects the pervasive sense of unease. By portraying the Aboriginal people as outsiders and accentuating their otherness, the narrative subtly hints at the potential threat they represent. The text records their observations, "The blacks were watching. Some of the men even grew noble in the stillness of their concentration and posture of their attenuated limbs. Their faces betrayed a kind of longing. Others,

though, and particularly the old, could have been wallowing beforehand in the dust; they had the dusty, grey-black skins of lizards (7).” In another incident, during the meeting of the expedition group with natives, following Turner’s disrespect of the aboriginal women, Voss extended his hand in friendship which shocked his group. His objective was to foster reconciliation and dismantle the wall of hatred that separated the two groups. However, his love and care were not reciprocated by the natives. Their reluctance and the sense of disillusionment stemmed from the history of extensive suffering they had faced by the white colonizers. The text records, “Now he approached the black whose instincts had rejected Turner’s offer, and, holding out his hand, said stiffly, ‘Here is my hand in friendship.’... Each of the white men was transfixed by the strangeness of this ceremony. ...Then the native dropped the hand. There was too much here for him to accept” (205).

When Voss’s group fell ill, the aboriginal young guide, Jackie was sent to search for a suitable place for treatment. Amid the difficult times, the aboriginals take the opportunity to rob the belongings of the expedition. Judd confirmed to the group that an axe, bridle and some of the things required necessary survival had been stolen by the natives. However, Voss on the contrary refused Judd’s claim, “We cannot accuse the natives on no evidence (340).” Following the loot, Mr Palfreyman was sent to investigate the theft. He did not carry any weapon with him and yet met his death at the hands of the natives. Witnessing his death, Judd, Turner and Ralph Angus, lost their motivation to continue with the expedition. Further in the story, the elderly aboriginal guide Dugald who held the responsibility of taking care of the parcel of letters, purposely destroys them. While he was being watched by the Aborigines, he set the letters on fire symbolically breaking his remaining association with the white world. The text justifies: “These papers contained the thoughts of which the whites wished to be rid ...The old man folded the papers. With the solemnity of one who was interpreted a mystery, he tore them into little pieces” (220).

The aboriginals have operated according to their native principles and customs while residing within their native land. They were completely absorbed in their own affairs. The concerns of the whites hold no sway over them. Their focus was totally on their routine practices and tasks, and they were completely indifferent to the events unfolding in the white world. The values of the whites hold no relevance to the natives. Following Dugald’s departure, the younger aboriginal guide Jackie’s behaviour suggests an increasing inclination to follow his instincts, often with minimal or zero reliance on Voss. Later, he joins the group of the aboriginals who had been closely following the expedition. However, despite Voss’s claimed affection towards the natives, he still considers them as subjects of his hypothetical kingdom. The culmination of the Aboriginal guides’ actions which includes Jackie’s departure and Dugald’s destruction of letters, along with their union with the Indigenous people, dismantles the white dominance in the Aboriginal territory. In the novel, Jackie, who appears to have gradually learned more of the white’s language, takes it upon himself to initiate the group into indigenous culture by explaining to them the significance of the burial platforms. By employing the language of the whites to simplify their understanding of his culture, he serves as a link between the two realms. Despite the obvious barrier of the language, he efficiently overcomes the imposed walls between the natives and the whites explaining the importance of the snake in his culture to Voss.

While reading the journal or even the novel, it is very evident that the obligatory closeness between the natives and the white explorers on their journey makes their racial differences less significant thereby making the boundaries between the two groups less distinct. During their expedition through the desert, they all were at the mercy of unrelenting forces of nature. In the desert, they endure extreme hardships and suffering due to scarcity of water, food and other survival

needs. Such isolation brings them all to a state of equality, which never existed otherwise among them; creating a mutual dependence for survival. When faced with inadequate resources, the act of sharing food establishes a fundamental bond of shared humanity. In cultural studies, food is often seen as a symbol of togetherness. The act of communal dining is typically seen as a representation of the bond and sense of connection among people. On the other hand, exhibiting aversion or contempt for the eating customs of another group is often deeply rooted in biases and animosity toward those people. In the novel, during their travel through the desert, Jackie kills a lizard, “‘Is it really good to eat?’ asked the German. Dugald restricted that possibility by waving the same long, black stick of a finger. ‘Blackfeller’ he laughed, and Jackie joined in” (190). The original journals of Leichhardt showcase several instances where the white settlers acquired the adaptability to consume lizards, rats and snakes as food for their survival. Such eating habits would not have been even considered in their usual world. The white men find themselves relying on the type of food that they would never have considered part of their civilized diet, but it becomes a crucial necessity for their survival in the desert. When contextualized with the novel’s plot, this action serves to highlight the idea that when Voss, at a moment when he was close to death, allows the witchetty grub on his tongue, he has achieved a profound oneness with the indigenous community. Although he is considered as a German “foreign bloke”, his transition from being a foreigner to feeling like a native begins earlier even before embarking on his expedition into the wilderness. This can be seen in his disapproval when the locals did not appreciate the native landscape. He comments, “A pity that you huddle ... your landscape is of great subtlety” (11). Once in nature, he further states, “I am at home. It is like the poorer parts of Germany. It could be Mark Brandenburg” (11), suggesting that he has started to identify with and relate to the local environment. This shift in perspective hints at the ongoing transformation of his relationship with the land and its people.

The novel portrays a significant transformation in the power dynamics. The counterbalance of the white hegemony is symbolically completed with the killing of Voss by Jackie, using the same knife which was gifted to him by Voss, signifying the end of white dominance while demonstrating the fragility of the power of the white, in contrast with the earlier asserted dominance of the natives. The killing of Voss by Jackie carries a sense of poetic justice. Jackie is compelled to perform this act as a form of reparation to his people. Additionally, the use of the very weapon gifted by Voss to commit the act emphasizes the idea of reciprocity. The moment of Voss's death, where his blood mingles with the Australian earth, signifies his integration with the land itself. This merging with the land reflects the novel's exploration of Australia's complex process of growth and self-definition. It underscores the notion that Voss, in his final moments, becomes one with the land, akin to the Indigenous people of Australia. The text records: “His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately. (394)”. Judd's comment further emphasizes the lasting impact of Voss on the country, implying that he becomes an enduring part of Australia's history and landscape: “Voss left his mark on the country. The blacks talk about him to this day. He is still there. He is there in the country, and always will be.” (443) Just as Voss becomes an intrinsic part of the land as his blood is absorbed by it, the Aboriginal boy Jackie’s soul bears the indelible mark of the white culture. The novel's exploration of transcultural interactions leads to his transformation into a hybrid, mirroring Voss's journey.

Patrick White’s novel *Voss* can be seen as an exploration of Australia's evolving identity and its interconnectedness with the land and its indigenous inhabitants. He used the character of Voss and his narrative arc to delve deeper into the turbulent and transformative process of growth and self-definition. The conclusion of his character, where his blood becomes one with the land, symbolizes a profound connection between individuals, their nation, and the

environment, akin to the Indigenous people of Australia. Furthermore, White's exploration of the Aboriginals and the possibility of depicting white individuals as capable of sharing the aboriginal culture challenges the traditional colonialist concerns that categorize humanity into polarised rigid divisions, where they carry the white man's burden to improve the rest of the world, particularly the sections of non-white people.

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