



## The Thematic Symbols in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*

Dr. Amar Singh

Professor and Head

Department of English

Govt. College Chand, Chhindwara

### Abstract

The *Solid Mandala* is a symbol to reunify the self. The twin brothers, Arthur and Waldo Brown, belonged to the same womb yet so irreconcilable in temperament and personality. Even their lack-lustre love lives (neither of them got married) are remarkably similar, when, as teenagers, they both fall for Dulcie Feinstein and then, as adults, when they strike up a close friendship with their neighbour, Mrs. Poulter. They secretly loathe one another to find a balance between intimacy and independence. Arthur is good-natured but Waldo is bookish. Waldo and Arthur never fit in themselves. This novel is coloured by individual prejudices, personalities and beliefs.

Key words: human nature, temperament, prejudices, irreconcilability

*The Solid Mandala* (1966), the novel divided into four parts, is a story of twin brothers Waldo Brown and Arthur Brown living in Sarsaparilla from their childhood, youth, middle age and retirement. The central part of it consists of an account of their life, first from Waldo's and then from Arthur's point of view. Waldo's disappointment in love and authorship, his increasing resentfulness of his half-witted, incomprehensible brother, his sterile and jaundiced view of life was balanced by his confused and inarticulate brother who has a radiant goodness and insight that are represented by his four mandala-like marbles. The latter, being simpler of the twins, coveted his mandala and his simplicity and straight way to the truth about people make him wiser than his more intelligent brother. He realizes that those around him cannot appreciate their meaning. "It was himself only who would remain, the keeper of the mandalas, and must guess their final secret through touches and light."<sup>1</sup> The conflict to guess their meaning is symbolized in the novel by the "red gold disc of the sun, which he wanted to hold by

the icebergs."<sup>2</sup> This Mandala concept is based partly on Lawrence Daws' Mandala paintings, which suggested an "all embracing symbol to explain existence."<sup>3</sup>

White does not suffer from an artistic imperfection in this novel as William Walsh, an eminent critic, has exempted *The Solid Mandala* from any such weakness. He has actually provided the abstract pattern, a double narrative of the same event through the twins who seem to be two sides of the same coin. There is vital and unbroken movement between ideas and material in the novel. The thematic complexities of the novel are intimately connected with each other as "soul with body."<sup>4</sup>

*The Solid Mandala*, rich in both symbolism and imagery, has the most common theme of suffering and mysticism apart from the "spiritual consciousness in middle-class life". The sole reason behind the success of this novel is mysticism which depends on the "believability of its human values-

*the value of mysticism must lie in what it has to offer to human beings, for its value to higher beings remain unassessable.*"<sup>5</sup> Religious philosophy, the common salient feature of White's novels, is an important aspect of this novel also. "Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books. What I am interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God. I belong to no church, but I have a religious faith.... I believe God does intervene; I think there is a Divine Power, a Creator, who has an influence on human beings if they are willing to be open to him."<sup>6</sup>

The sketch description of Arthur Brown, the development of the individual as a being from society and its collective forms, depicts the crisis of White's own life. For this, he re-educates his ego to perform a really difficult task. Just to develop a separate individuality, he has to initially descend into the unconscious and then return to the upper world. White's repeatedly showing Waldo the marble with the knot inside, is the transitory image of his attraction for the external world. Waldo is impressed by Arthur by constantly holding the marble before his brother. Walsh has compared the urgent need of Arthur with that of the novelist, by bringing Waldo to consciousness: "He is so to speak, the un-lived, unrealized potential within White himself.... He is the image par excellence of repressed life, life which throughout the last twenty-five years or more of White's career has not been allowed to live. Arthur, then, is no external vision, but White's own masculine shadow, his positive spirit, his capacity for change and transformation."<sup>7</sup>

Arthur has certain pragmatic abilities to the chores as milking the cow, making bread and hobbies which his father considered feminine and disliked. His duty as a delivery boy with the local grocer Mr. Allwright is his favourite work and had a great affinity with animals. His command over numerical skill, which has no connection with intelligence in the ordinary cases, was often taken advantage of by others. Frankness, a definitely positive and protective side of influence on others, was a charming trait of Arthur's personality. The women, especially Dulcie Feinstein, Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Feinstein, had deep affection for him. Not being

intelligent in the accepted sense, he had a soul and insight into the nature of reality. Such a variety of characters in White's *The Solid Mandala* best describe as "Each in his limited ways is a good person, each is a failure, each inadequate for the strains put upon them. But each, also, is an integral whole, completely human creation, and this quality, in the two Brown parents receives from the author the respect it deserves."<sup>8</sup>

In the final part of *The Solid Mandala*, there is again the walk of the twin brothers down Baranugli Road which has an unbroken connection with the beginning when the two-aged man is walking hand in hand. This time there is a hidden desire in Waldo to completely destroy his shadow-brother, to drive him to a heart attack. Arthur thinks it proper to use his final attempt to get Waldo to turn towards the individual. Suddenly, there is an ironic twist in the story as the destroyer himself is ill-fatedly destroyed. Waldo increased the contemplated pace of his walk, while Arthur was "trotting like a dog". (p. 63) A truck accidentally slammed into the flap of Waldo's oilskin as he tried to drive Arthur to his death. "Denial of the brother is ultimately a denial of the self; the desire to kill the shadow-personality is a form of self-murder".<sup>9</sup>

Arthur was now hopelessly alone; he had always tried hard to get united with his brother. In the story, they had been found together but had hardly been able to achieve the desired "mandalic unity" which Arthur had always yearned for; it had usually been an "incestuous and undifferentiated fusion."<sup>10</sup>

Arthur considered Waldo's death too great for anybody to bear and in this terrific tragic phase of his life he lost his knotted mandalas in the desolate streets. Mrs. Poulter was the only person who astonishingly helped him at this time of grief. She was happy to hear the news of Waldo's death and exultant to see poor Arthur: "the aged man or crumpled child began to whimper, so she went to him again, because it was necessary to take him in her arms, all the men she had never loved, the children she had never had". (p. 311) Mrs. Poulter made the poor ruined Arthur her very own dribble

child as well as her subdued lover. Though she is a minor character of this novel, she is regarded as an earth mother, and defeat of the maternal ego is sensibly experienced by a positive light. Brain Kiernan considered the surprising appearance of Mrs. Poulter in this tragic scene "unconvincing...her transformation is stated...rather than fictionally argued and discovered".<sup>11</sup> Tacey says, "Mrs. Poulter is not a 'character' in the conventional sense, she is a mythic figure, and she does have to 'earn' her sudden endowment; she merely has to claim it. Her transformation derives from the sudden rush of energy into the maternal image".<sup>12</sup>

In the final scene, the faces of Arthur and Mrs. Poulter are reflected upon the circular surface of a glass marble. "She saw the two faces becoming one, at the centre of that glass eye, which Arthur sat holding in his hand". (p. 312) It suggestively indicates the conjunction of "Mother" and her "unborn child". A. P. Riemer comments that on this occasion Mrs. Poulter designedly becomes "the custodian of this symbol of perfection... she is the anima... capable of Mandalic experience".<sup>13</sup> Thelma Hering concludes that the "novel demonstrates the fulfillment of the quest for totality".<sup>14</sup> The end of the novel is judiciously tragic. Sergeant Foyle arrives to take Arthur to asylum. Mrs. Poulter, who had accepted this dribbled child as saint, didn't resist and allowed him to go.

*The Solid Mandala* is like an opaque emotional poem written in prose form. Philosophically the novel is inclined to be the tragedy of human imperfections because neither of the twins was complete in him as he was the divided part of one whole person. The mood also happens to be somber, serene and submissive throughout the length of the novel.

White has enough knowledge of oriental metaphysics and tantric Buddhism or Hindu Shakti-tantra. Mrs. Feinstein, a Jewish lady appears to have read the Upanishads. For instance, when she offered lemonade to Arthur, she advised him: "You should drink it slowly and concentrate... Then you will extract prana from this lemonade." "The what?" It is Indian... for "vital force".<sup>15</sup> Here lemonade can be

symbolically compared with amrit or nectar, which gives strength and power. The twin brother is distinctly separate parts of one whole personality. These two waves of one personality in psychology are called "Janadandh", which mean "waiting for somebody to join them in a whole." (p. 232) They symbolize man's quest for completeness.

#### Works Cited

- Patrick White, *The Solid Mandala*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1966, p. 13.
- Ken Goodwin, "Symbolic and Social-realist Fiction", *A History of Australian Literature*, Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1986, p. 173.
- Graeme Kinross Smith, Ed, *Australia's Writers: an illustrated guide to their lives and their work*, Thomas Nelson, Australia Pvt. Ltd. 1998; p. 303.
- Veena Noble, "A Study of the Hermaphroditic Elements in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*", David Kerr and R. K. Dhawan, Eds., *Australian and Indian Literature*, p. 32.
- David Kerr and R. K. Dhawan, *Australian and Indian Literature*, op. cit., p. 32.
- Paul Brennan and Christine Flynn, *Patrick White Speaks*, op. cit., p. 19.
- David J. Tecey, "The Tightening knot", *Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious*, Oxford Univ. Press, Australia, 1988, p. 122.
- William Walsh, *Patrick White's Fiction*, op. cit., p. 91.
- David J. Tecey, *Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious*, op. cit., p. 142.
- Ibid. p. 142.
- Brian Krinan, "The Novel of Patrick White," Geoffrey Duttan, Ed, *The Literature of Australia*, p. 476.
- David J. Tecey, *Patrick White, Fiction and the Unconscious*, op. cit., p. 145.
- A P Reimer, "Vision of the Mandala in *The Tree of Man*", G A Wilkes, Ed, *Ten Essay on Patrick White*, p. 115.
- Thelma Herring, "Self and Shadow The Quest for Totality in *The Solid Mandala*", G A Wilkes, Ed, *Ten Essays on Patrick White*, p. 82.
- Ratnakar S Sadawarte, "Occult Symbolism in *The Solid Mandala*", David Kerr and Dhawan, Eds, *Australian and Indian Literature*, p. 39