

Significance of Mandala in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*

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Abstract

Patrick White, as a novelist has not received sufficiently acknowledged. His material Australianness and his attitude toward it have posed obstacles for reviewers and critics both domestically and internationally. The themes highlighted in Patrick White's writings include isolation, loneliness, the search for purpose in a materialistic society, and the examination of Australian identity through myth, symbolism, and frequently with the Australian landscape as a backdrop. The contradictions between life and art are revealed by a close reading of White's *The Solid Mandala*. The twins have served as a structural element that includes the brothers conflict. On one level, White tries to illustrate the inability to integrate two perspectives. First, from Waldo's point of view, and then Arthur's. Both these perspectives are further sandwiched between the outer framing perspectives of society. The Marbles refers to the little glass spheres that Arthur carries, which are to him 'Solid Mandalas,' symbols of wholeness and the luminous mystery he senses at the heart of things. The final outburst between the two brothers that led to one's death marks the novel's conclusion. White's book challenges us to think about the duality of everything and how our viewpoint distorts how we see the world.

Keywords: Patrick White, Mandala, Totality, Dualities, Conflict.

The Solid Mandala revolves around the contrast and conflict between the twin brothers, Arthur and Waldo Brown. They are twin conscious, separate yet closely linked by birth and long association. The twins are distinct, yet complementary parts of a single person. Waldo Brown is the intellectual, accepted by the tight world of tidiness and quick answers of punctuality and unbreakable rules, but he is arid, nervous, introverted and sterile in his aristocratic and literary pretensions.

The Solid Mandala is divided into four parts. The "Waldo" and "Arthur" sections which are different from one another, are enclosed within shorter sections. The brothers' constricted world, stands as a contrast to a larger world which they ignore. The 'Brown Brothers' are no ordinary twin brothers. They are the means by which White takes a constructive step further on the quest for wholeness. This quest now takes White in the direction of the Jungian Mandala which serves as an organizing factor for the four-part

structure of the novel. As Carl Jung says, “The ‘sacred circle’ has the function of protecting the center of the personality from being drawn out and from breaking up” (341).

Mandala drawing, first practiced by Tibetan Buddhists and then developed by Carl Jung, is a form of integrative body–mind training and currently one of the main forms of drawing psychotherapy. Jung believed that mandala drawing has the function of integrating psychological division, enhancing psychological harmony, and preserving personality integrity. Jung viewed the Mandala as a pattern generated by the psyche in an attempt to integrate itself and to find wholeness. This pattern was used by Jung to show how an imaginative order can be imposed upon chaos. A mandala is a four-part structure made up of opposites that are juxtaposed and maintained in dialectic tension without being destroyed.

Arthur reads out from an encyclopedia, the definition of a Mandala, “*The Mandala is a symbol of totality. It is believed to be the ‘dwelling of the god’. Its protective circle is a pattern of order super-imposed on-psychic-chaos. Sometimes its geometric form is seen as a vision-*” (238). The concept of divinity as filling all things agrees with White’s choice of the adjective solid to accompany the mandala image. As Carl Jung says, “The mandala serves a conservative purpose-namely, to restore a previously existing order. But it can also serve the creative purpose of giving expression and form to something that does not yet exist, something new and unique” (102).

Waldo’s sense of failure is acute and it attacks him in a rather fatal way. Waldo is incomplete. He begins to hate himself and it is very obviously self-hatred that leads Waldo to put on an old dressing gown which had belonged to his mother and then stand before the mirror, preening himself. He is very clearly denying his own identity when he assumes a false one of a woman.

When he was finally and fully arranged, bony, palpitating, plucked, it was no longer Waldo Brown, in spite of the birthmark above his left collar bone. Slowly the salt-cellars filled with icy sweat, his ribs shivery as satin, a tinkle of glass beads silenced the silence. Then Memory herself seated herself in her chair, tilting it as far back as it would go, and tilted and tilted, in front of the glass. (193)

This is clearly a kind of self-punishment Waldo is imposing upon himself for being the failure that he is.

The solution to this problem is contained in the image of the mandala. Waldo can

deal with this failure only if and when he acknowledges to the interdependence of himself and Arthur. Arthur is everything that Waldo is not. He is strong, alive, buoyant and spontaneous and most important of all, Arthur knows how to love. “Who and where were the gods?” (217). Arthur does not know the answer to this question but he knows that he cannot understand cruelty. Perhaps it is because Arthur does not understand cruelty that he is able to perceive the tragedy of life. He is concerned with the truth and what his mother considers to be dishonesty is not so in his opinion. And so he does not consider it a sacrilege to look into people’s houses. He feels that it is the best way to know them better.

The “Arthur” section of the novel changes the prevailing tone because it will now be Arthur’s perceptions which will be presented to the reader. Arthur seems to recognize that it is he who can counter-balance and amend Waldo’s deficiencies. “Nothing could have hurt Arthur. Arthur only feared for Waldo” (228). He knows that he is the stronger of the two and that it is his task to impose order, on the chaotic anarchy of Waldo’s world. At the very beginning of this section presents the image of “the red gold disc of the sun” (215). The orange disc is burning brightly over the iceberg, emblematic of the living mind of Arthur working over the icebergs which bring Waldo to mind. The red gold disc of the sun, like all other circles and spheres, becomes a talisman for Arthur to prove to him that mandalas exist on all levels, from his tiny marbles to the great world and what lies beyond it.

The experiences related in the Waldo’s section which appear twisted and chaotic, viewed from Waldo’s morbid thinking, now take on a totally different dimension when White brings them to the reader from Arthur’s healthier point of view. Arthur changes Waldo’s morbid relationships into something loving and responsive. The cow Waldo’s point of view is now explained by Arthur as an occasion which had called for a sharing of suffering and agony. The tragedy is ridiculous and frightening but it forces its audience to share the agony, “but that, surely, was what tragedy is for” (230).

Waldo when he met with an accident, Arthur weeps for him not because he is afraid to be left on his own but because he feels the compelling need to impress upon his brother his abiding need for him. It is because he can love that Arthur’s artistic creations represent the tragic aspect of life. Arthur shares all Waldo’s frustrations and he writes a poem to celebrate their common pain. But Waldo is never able to emotionally respond to any of these situations which is why Arthur fears for Waldo. He knows that Waldo is dry and arid. White says, “Much as he admired his brother, for his scholastic

brilliance, his knowledge of the world, his self-sufficiency, he had begun to fear for Waldo, for some lack of suppleness in his relationships with other people” (243- 44). Arthur is convinced that he is the only one who can protect Waldo from complete self-destruction.

What Arthur sees in Waldo’s world is mere chaos, conflict and sickness. Waldo is deficient because he is sterile and cold. So it is Arthur who now asks the question – What “is the meaning of ‘totality’?” (240). George Brown’s answer to this question does not satisfy Arthur because of its superficiality. Totality, George Brown admits, is a word so simple in itself that it defies explanation. The dictionary supplies a sketchy definition “Totality is ‘the quality of being total’” (240). Then Arthur realized Dad would never know, any more than Waldo. It was himself who was, and would remain, the keeper of mandalas, who must guess their final secret through touch and light.

The mandala is the pre-dominating image in the novel. Since the mandala is a symbol of totality and since Arthur feels that it is he who must work at achieving totality, it is he and not Waldo who becomes the keeper of mandalas. He displays an intuitive fascination with religious and mystical symbolism, an interest which White displays. In none of his previous novels has White accorded such minute attention to the structuring of the novel as he has in *The Solid Mandala*.

The quaternary is a predominant image as there are four parts in the novel, four epigraphs, four corners to Arthur’s dance and four marbles which Arthur keeps on his body. The geometric shapes–the triangle and the square which emerge through the structure of the novel are White’s apocalyptic images for man and God. In all these shapes, man remains at the centre, but knotted in all the conflicts and problems facing humanity, subject to time, pain and death.

Patrick White is now exploring deep into the psychological and spiritual depths in order to discover the way to man’s wholeness. Arthur and his twin brother together make one man, potentially capable of achieving perfection. Both of them are very real individuals and there is nothing vague or uncanny about White’s presentation of the two brothers. As Patricia A. Morley writes,

... Arthur’s love for his brother is an apocalyptic image of man’s love for the archetypal brother, every other human being. Man’s divided state, which is identified with the number two or with the first two corners of a square, is squared through love. The wholeness achieved through love is identified with the quaternary and the square which, in turn, is closely

associated with or contained within the mandala. (8)

Arthur must play the role of the redeeming benefactor because it is he who has the capacity to love. He holds the mandala as a symbolism because it is he who can impose some kind of an order on the dualities prevalent in the novel. First, Arthur has his four marbles, the microcosmic spheres which are his solid mandalas. He hands one to Dulcie and the next to Mrs. Poulter and they graciously accept his gift. The third marble, Arthur keeps for himself. The pattern inside the marble seems to reflect Arthur's own relationship with his brother. But their interaction is never so uncomplicated. Waldo, however, refuses the gift of his mandala, the one with the knot at its heart. So far, Arthur fails too because he is not able to actually relieve Waldo's agony.

The only occasion when Arthur comes closest to realizing the fullness of his own being is when he performs the mandala dance before Mrs. Poulter. The tragic corner in Arthur's dance is the one belonging to Waldo, to spite to winter and death. In the other three corners, Arthur has known fulfilment. First he danced the dance of himself. "Even in the absence of Gods, his life, or dance, was always prayerful" (265). The man who had once asked, who and where the gods? now keeps his faith for he is not afraid to worship.

In the second corner, he declared his love for Dulcie Feinstein, and for her husband, by whom, through their love for Dulcie, he was, equally, possessed, so they were all three united, and their children still to be conceived. Into their corner of his mandala he wove their Star, on which their three-corner relationship was partly based. (266)

This "three-cornered relationship" is suggestive of the existence of a triangle within the quaternary. Yet it is not subversive because Arthur imposes a pattern over the existing chaos. He next dances for Mrs. Poulter and fulfils both her and himself by becoming for her the child she has never conceived. To everyone, Arthur brings completeness without even making a concerted effort at doing so. And yet, he fails his brother. As he dances the fourth and final corner of his dance Arthur realises that he cannot save his brother. He now experiences a living death but brings himself out of this condition by forcing himself to realize that at the centre lies a force which will ultimately save Christ's passion, which can be the passion of "all their lives." Christ's suffering and love were redemptive. That is for Arthur the most revealing aspect of Christianity and he tries to offer the quaternary the opportunity to show willingness to suffer and to love.

Man does appear to be at the centre of White's mandala image. If man is present

then the divine has to be present too. In Arthur's four cornered mandala dance man and God come together and coalesce. "Till in the centre of their mandala he danced the passion of all their lives, the blood running out of the backs of his hands, water out of the hole in his ribs. His mouth was a silent hole, because no sound was needed to explain" (267).

The conclusion to the mandala dance does put man at the centre, but a man whom image and archetype identify with divinity. Arthur's dance is equated with life itself. In the first three corners of his dance, Arthur is at perfect harmony with himself, Dulcie and Mrs. Feinstein and lastly with Mrs. Poulter when he becomes for her the child she has never had. Yet in the fourth corner of his dance which belongs to his brother, Arthur recaptures images which recall deadness, withering and discontinuity-aspects which typify not - just Waldo's writings but his life as well. When Arthur is unable to dance his brother out of himself, he is equally unable to save Waldo.

Using the mandala as a symbolic structure, Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala* examines issues of loneliness, duality, and the pursuit of wholeness. Arthur and Waldo Brown, twin brothers who symbolize opposing viewpoints, are the main characters of the book. Arthur is impulsive, affectionate, and perceptive, whereas Waldo is sterile, introverted, and intelligent. The endeavour to bring conflicting forces together is highlighted by their conflict and complementarity. A Tibetan Buddhist symbol that Carl Jung later studied, the mandala stands for spiritual harmony and psychological wholeness. This search for completeness is symbolized throughout the book by Arthur's marbles, which he refers to as "solid mandalas." While Waldo, ensnared in his dogmatic worldview, is unable to find emotional or spiritual fulfillment, Arthur recognizes the importance of connection and balance.

Therefore, this research paper examines the mandala significance in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*, emphasizing how the characters spiritual and psychological development can be understood through the complex mandala formations. The protagonists of the book, Waldo and Arthur, are dualistic; their opposing dispositions represent the conflict between disorder and order. This study examines how, in the larger framework of Australian society, mandala imagery represents their need for identity and wholeness through a close reading of the text. The mandala emphasizes concepts of balance, cyclical existence, and the pursuit of meaning, serving as a symbol of integration. This study provides deeper insights into White's narrative strategies and the philosophical foundations of his work by placing *The Solid Mandala* inside a



mandala framework.

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