

THE THEME, VISION AND SYMBOLS IN PATRICK WHITE'S
THE AUNT'S STORY

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The Aunt's Story (1948) is a reality based story of the transformation of the protagonist, an independent Australian spinster Theodora Goodman: "*this thing a spinster which, at best, becomes that institution an aunt.*"¹ It is a solitary spirit, enjoying life in loneliness, a journey of individual experience in a lonely island in which no "*fellow football*" is ever heard. The three phases of the protagonist's life coincide with three parts of its story. The first phase, which begins and ends with the death of Theodora's mother, deals with the reconstruction of Theodora's life up to middle age: "*A woman of fifty, or not yet, whose eyes burned still, under the black hair, which she still frizzed above the forehead in little puffs.*" (AS 12)

The second phase narrates Theodora's distinct exploration between "*I*" and "*otherness*" while the third and final phase is based on "*contemplation*" and "*detachment*" The death note of Mrs. Goodman, Theodora's mother, begins: "*But old Mrs. Goodman did die at last.*" This biased and unbalanced statement forces one to contemplate about it twice. In death Mrs. Goodman is transformed into a passive character from a domineering one with the end of her tyrannical reign and the consequent end to the enslavement of Theodora. Mrs. Goodman's death perceptibly altered every "*thing*" in her life. Theodora's life immediately collided with actuality painfully. The oddly over careful rearrangement of the room's furniture shows Theodora's nervous response: "*So, that her mouth trembled, and her hand, rigid as protesting wood, on the coffin's yellow lid.*" (AS 11)

There is a lot of difference between two sisters Theodora and her younger sister Fanny. The former is an extremely calm and quiet lady, while Fanny always attracts the attention and sympathy of others. Though Theodora is filled with extreme pain, it doesn't reflect in her appearance. "*She could not mourn like Fanny, who would cry for the dead until she had appeased the world and exhausted what she understood to be sorrow... For Theodora who was less certain...she could not mourn. Her feelings were knotted tight.*" (AS 12) According to Theodora, the death of her mother is not very traumatic as she died in sleep but for Fanny to express her affectation for the dead was to increase the significance of the deceased.

In *The Aunt's Story*, the character of George Goodman, Theodora Goodman's father, is dramatically contrasted with Mrs. Goodman as the former is always supportive, receptive, nurturing and a typically maternal figure while the latter is harsh, uncompromising and responsible for the murderous control of the "stifling atmosphere" of the house. "There is a significant transference of sexuality to the father/daughter relationship."² A strong father-daughter emotional bond is comfortably adopted in the beginning of the novel. The echo of "matriarchal resonance" is heard everywhere in "The relationship between Theodora Goodman and George Goodman which functions as a marked re-enactment of the Oedipal pattern."³ Theodora's nurturing father, the guardian of her sleep, attendant of her waking and childhood friend, ruled over her comfortably while her mother was a background figure only: "Altogether this was...veined like the skin inside an unhatched egg in which she curled safe still, but smiling for them to wake her, to touch her cheek with a finger and say: I believe Theodora is asleep. Then she would scream: I am not, I am not, and throw open her eyes to see who. Usually it was father." (AS 22) Theodora's relationship with her mother appeared to be of a dutiful daughter. "She had lived with her mother, and helped her into her clothes. She came when the voice called." (AS 10)

The undisputed heroine of *The Aunt's Story*, Theodora Goodman, spent her earliest years on the family estate of Meroe, a beautiful landscape described with the help of symbols: "Whether it was summer or winter, the landscape was more communicative than people talking. It was close, as close as your own thought, which was sometimes heavy and painful as stone, sometimes ran lighter than a wagtail, or spurted like a pewit into the air." (AS 32) The closeness of landscape has figuratively been compared with the "close thoughts of an individual";, sometimes "heavy as a stone," while at others "lighter than a wagtail." Theodora, interested in reading books, had only affection for her learned father, who encouraged her saying: "You must come in, Theodora...you must come in whenever you like, and take to books." (AS 23)

Theodora's father was a bookworm, gentle and ineffective; he was a sort of humanist engrossed in the Classical literature of Greece to intuitively avail his existential wisdom. Patrick White has pictorially sketched him as his awareness of Meroe is all due to the "overtones" born of that literature: "If you went inside, Father was sitting with his chin on his chest, looking at books. He would sit like this for many hours, only his breath lifting his beard, as steady as a tree." (AS 23) Theodora is soon forced to recognize the otherwise reality of her father as against her imagination that he has an "ineffectual" visible quality, which "belies" her idealized image when she comes in contact with an objective observer, Mr. Parrott who commented: "Meroe... Rack - un -Ruin Hollow." Theodora heard the conversation of men while waiting for her father in town under the balcony of the Imperial Hotel. "All this gadding off to foreign places;" said Mr. Parrott. "Sell-in off a paddock here and a paddock there. George Goodman has no sense of responsibility to his own land."

Theodora, while returning home, realized: "Oppressed by the weight of sadness, that nobody would lift, because nobody would ever know that she was shouldering it. Least of all Father, who was thick and mysterious as a tree, but also hollow, by judgment of the men beneath the balcony." (AS 25, 26) Theodora's all enquiry about her father's condition concluded that he was a failure father of psychological and material decline due to her mother: "I refuse to vegetate",

said Mrs. Goodman. *"Let's go somewhere. Before we die."* Mrs. Goodman is the forceful agent behind her husband's disintegration and disrepute. Theodora is reflectively terrified at the prospect of her father's death because he goes through an acute emotional and spiritual crisis. She felt that both the ray of her *"independence"* and *"individuality"* were going to become dimmer day by day.

The central theme of *The Aunt's Story*, the post-Second World War novel, is based on Nietzschean philosophy, *"one of the lonely atheist's agonized capacity for insight into the nature of existence."*⁴ Theodora has a desire to lose her personal identity and thereby ironically to find it. She rejects even love because it seems a threat to this process. People sometimes called her mad; even her sister Fanny considers her to be *"quite mad"*: *"Anywhere, or everywhere"*, she said at last. *"Except that the world is large."* Theodora, blushed Fanny, is *"quite, quite, mad."* (AS 17) Nobody realized that Theodora was in search of peace forgetting the bitter memories of the past. Her life is fractured by her mother in countless ways who interferes with her activities to draw everything towards her. *"The maternal unconscious invades the field of the personality robs it of its direction and renders it ineffectual."*⁵ Theodora lived life in a shell of loneliness and her relationship with her self-centred, hard smooth-coating mother was not favourable to her. Mrs. Goodman always favoured Fanny with a biased personality. *"The piano is not for Theodora"*, Mother sighed. *"Fanny is the musical one."*³⁸ Theodora's goodness was even noticed by outsiders, Mrs. Parrott, who once said, *"She is a good, bright girl. She is always polite."* (AS 31) Mrs. Goodman did not acknowledge an old man who was an acquaintance of her husband was not allowed to enter the house, and was given dinner on the verandah. That man said to Theodora a little later: *"You are more like your father."* (AS 43)

Theodora's awkward distance maintaining attitude was noticed by Miss Spofforth, the head mistress of Spofforth residential school. She is said to be imaginative, a sort of romantic. *"There will be moments of passing affection through which the opaque world will become transparent."* She fails to believe in humanity. She felt she would *"never overcome the distances."* (AS 51) Her closest of relatives and friends were ignored by her unnatural flow of communication. This lonely lady was also deprived of love of the urbane Huntley Clarkston, a solicitor family friend whom she disliked. *"You will not find me a very good company, Mr. Clarkson."* (AS 99) Self is the *"great monster"* for Theodora whose opinion about herself is different. *"To myself I am fatally simple."* (AS 116) She believes that ultimately the self will be destroyed nothing more than air or water. *"People for Theodora were statues who assumed distant, arbitrary and inimitable positions. Only with things was there a possibility of otherness and liberty for self."* For these reasons people understood Theodora to be the most cumbersome woman. Once Huntley Clarkston said, *"You are the most difficult woman, Theodora."* (AS 16)

White portrays Theodora a case for psychological study who not only rejects social reality but also wishes to destroy the very structure of her identity. She desolately considers herself a burden under the impact of *"her nihilism"* which is evident in her shooting of the little hawk with which she had been long associated: *"Theodora looked at the hawk.... But the act of the hawk, which she watched, hawk like, was a moment of shrill beauty that rose above the endlessness of bones. The red eye spoke of worlds that were brief and fierce."* (AS 33) The middle aged Theodora is

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curiously engaged in a quest for self-knowledge to experience the isolation and failure of human contact. Her strange remoteness is the cause of her personal collapse and her rejection of the world was because of her own choice to keep selfishness, greediness and uncreativity of the world. She found everyone and everything meaninglessly materialistic. The activities of the hawk entertained her but she later killed it.

There is a reflection of Indian philosophy of self-realization, self-knowledge and self-transcendence as a central theme in *The Aunt's Story*. The two ways of renunciation "*nivritti marga*" or renunciation and "*pravritti marga*" or life of activity lead to the same destination each prescribing its own obligations. Theodora's denial of life resembles the heroine and hero of *The Madeleine* and *Ramaswamy* of Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*. "*The concept of self-realization can stir up divine visions and a highly balanced outlook of life, a sober approach to every event and factor in life, a policy of impersonality in regard to any kind of encounter in the world.*"⁶

Both Raja Rao and Patrick White consider women as "*Shakti*" as Mother-Earth, an inseparable part of society. The theme of Shakti worship runs in both the novels as the incarnation of feminine principle. Theodora Goodman thinks this world merely "Maya" unreal, or an illusion as in Raja Rao's novel the rope is ignorantly taken to be the serpent. It is "*Guru*" who can dispel all illusions, clear away the darkness of ignorance and make people realize the ultimate truth. Theodora's suffering actions coincidentally suggest White's thematic significance to "*things*" and "*objects*". "*She touched the old dark ugly furniture that had a dark and lingering smell of olives, the same sombre glare. There is perhaps no more complete a reality than a chair and a table....*"

The function of objects is like actions in a dream. Theodora's selection of the hotel Jardin as the most alluring paradise fulfilled "*the goal of the journey.*" The people she encountered were dream-like, acting more as fantasy than as realistic ones without leaving any impression on her mind. Her life in the world and her emergence into the adolescence was existentially "*suffocating*". She was dying "*to recover the lost reality of childhood*". Her stay in the Greek islands reflectively appeared as an image of her own personality "*tiny*" and "*vulnerable*", surrounded on every side by the strangely threatening waters. Theodora's absorption into the matrix, significantly emphasized by the "*devouring roses*", the plastic roses in the hallway, wallpaper roses in the bedroom and the roses in the Jardin all became aggressively activated and appear to "*wet their lips.*" (AS 196) All roses have different significance in different places.

The introduction of the character of Holstius, an earth spirit, is for the sake of end of Theodora's sadness as the bringer of "*glad tidings*", an illusion of imagination. It was his ability to smooth away doubts to make Theodora feel comfortable in her madness. She regarded him as a messiah with his healing hands to "*soothe the wounds.*" (AS 278) It was his task as a Guru to lead Theodora into complete identification with Maternal Nature. It was only he who brought the lantern to illuminate the road to dispel illusion or ignorance. "*If the heart is absolutely united with the soul of the "Guru", he will respond, and he will guide, and he may even mitigate certain adverse consequences of the impact of past "Karmas", but he cannot remove it.... You will have to pay for whatever you have done.*"⁷

White's introduction of Holstius is to help Theodora come out of her childhood world to realize an objective reality outside the self and build an increased respect for the created world and for the uniqueness of its people and things. Holstius' words spoken in a quasi-Jungian way as "*the two irreconcilable halves*", "*joy and sorrow*", "*flesh and marble*" and "*illusion and reality*" urge Theodora to "*accept*" both "*halves*". It creates an impression that he belongs to a higher unity. "*You cannot reconcile joy and sorrow*", Holstius said. "*Or flesh and marble, or illusion and reality, or life and death. For this reason, Theodora Goodman, you must accept.... So that there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality.*"⁸ Again "*several lives*" suggests Hindu philosophical inclination in White's mind, the concept of 'Punar Janam' or reincarnation. Holstius emphasizes the imperfections of society and the nature of human spirit. "*If we know better, we must keep it under our hats.*"⁹ Theodora being very kind to others, took upon herself the weight of others longings and happily bore their burdens in the manner as commanded by Christ to his followers. Thus we can confidently say that *The Aunt's Story* is "*almost*" a religious novel which is totally concerned with the relationship of man to God and God man.

The use of gauze rose has been dramatically highlighted in last sentence of the novel, "*the hat sat straight, but the doubtful rose trembled and glittered, leading a life of its own.*" (AS 287) Mrs. Goodman had long association with roses and the blackness in this case symbolized archaism and death. Here it represents liveliness into the "*uroboric world*" into which she had usually fallen. "*The dark rose is an appropriate symbol for a life which has sought, and now finally attained, self-extinction in the matrix.*"¹⁰

The Aunt's Story has a mixture of "*natural*" and "*algebraic*" symbols. Natural symbols are creation of imagination while algebraic symbols justify his own point of view and moral philosophy. White's concentration is on the natural symbols as rose, hawk, the garden, the nautilus shell etc. Rose is frequently used as symbol for home and homeliness purity. "*Theodora lying on her bed, could sense the roses, there was a reflection on the wall that was a rose -red sun coming out of the earth.... She felt very close to the roses the other side of the wall.*" (AS 21) They also meaningfully suggest artificiality, falseness and power: "*For a moment it gave Mrs. Goodman a feeling of power to put the roses there.*"⁹³ In the novel the carved wood symbolizes the physical solidity and personal soundness of Theodora's personality. Water is denoted as the unpredictable lives of Lou and Theodora which are awkwardly shapeless. "*But Lou was as unpredictable as water. Theodora sensed this. The shape of her own life had not been fixed*". (AS 16) Yellow colour relevantly symbolizes the lifeless being of Theodora Goodman. "*So, that the mirrors began to throw up the sallow Theodora Goodman, which meant who was too yellow... with gold light.*" (AS 13) The thread mythologically signifies life and the mirror acts like a guardian full of life which Theodora wanted to penetrate into with pleasure. Gold light is signifier of gladness. Hotel symbolizes Australian landscape, civilization and urbanization. The solicitor of Mrs. Goodman, Huntley Clarkston, said to Theodora, "*Theodora,... let's go to the races, let's lunch at a hotel.*" (AS 104) It depicts another facet of Australia i.e. the metropolitan cities. Monuments suggest continuity of human life: "*Moraitis said, 'their memorials do not reflect this fatality. All the Greek monuments suggest a continuity of life. The theatre at*

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Epidaurus, you have seen it, and Sanian? Pure life." (AS 108) Bones representatively suggest "Naked "and "Bareness" of a country, an ancient civilization, natives, pioneers and immigrants. According to Mr. Goodman, the place Greece and Meroe are described ironically "*big enough for peace of mind.*" (AS 24) The portrayal of Greece full of fences and straight lines suggest something in rest position. "*There was a peace of mind enough on Meroe. You could feel it, whatever it was, and you were not certain, but in your bones.*" (AS 287)

White's peace of mind deals with man's wilful separation from man. Imagery is an specially designed component of his novels. "*Imagery...is indispensable for the expression of religious ideas: it is a natural language of religion.... It is then, to be expressed that the literature of revelation should abound in imagery...*"¹¹ Black volcanic hills, fire, bones and knives are other images beautifully used describing Meroe. "*The hills were Meroe, and Meroe was the black volcanic hills....*" (AS 20) The bones have been used for the inner feelings and perception of one's mind. The image of fire suggests the ray of light, hope, happiness and passion in the darkness of Theodora's life. "*The little fire possessed the room of the house. It recreated the faces of Theodora Goodman and the man. She sensed her own, but she saw the face of the man, whose skin was ruddy fire.*" The image of knives denotes the cruelties and sufferings Theodora had bought for herself by willingly choosing the life of a solitary spirit. "*Poor Theo!*" she laughed. "*How cruel! Then Fanny took a knife and slashed the butter. She owed this for something that continued to rankle, under her laughter, unexplained, for Abyssinia perhaps.*" (AS 258,259)

White has used knife as a personal image as well as an erotic image. It shows the virginity of Theodora, her strongness and boldness of living a solitary life. R. D. Burns rightly says, "*The Aunt's Story is a work of great beauty, of rich beauty. The texture of music and the season-ness of paint are discovered on every page which make it really a masterpiece of Patrick White as well as masterpiece of English fiction.*"¹²

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