

The Tree of Man: The Saga of the Seasons of the Year and Life

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Patrick White is perhaps the only fiction writer of Australian fiction known to the ordinary reader. This is mainly because of the Nobel Prize he won for his novel. *The Tree of Man* is the first novel that won him international recognition. Coming back to Australia after a fourteen year absence he started with an old manuscript of ‘A Life Sentence’ and renamed it *The Tree of Man*. He described it as a novel “with no plot except the only one of living and dying” (Balachandran 122).

The Tree of Man is based on the metaphor of life as a journey – journey through time. White “rediscovers Australian landscape and explores the theme of the lonely, heroic quest through” (Colmer 42) the life of Parker. It is the story of a small farmer Stan Parker and his wife Amy, making productive land out of a block of bush, what is later called Durilgai. Durilgai is just a few miles from Sydney and is eventually swallowed by suburbs. The Parkers have two children, Ray and Thelma. Ray in course of time leaves home, leads a notorious life and meets his tragic end. Thelma marries Mr. Forsdyke, a well off and genteel solicitor and becomes a social success. Amy commits adultery with a commercial traveller and Stan mentally commits adultery by lusting for the beautiful Madeleine Armstrong. In course of the plot there is a bush fire which burns down Glastonbury, and then there is also a flood which almost washes them up. A brief period of drought too is faced by the Parkers.

Herman Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* unites the elements of characterisation and each of the five symbolic phases of his previous essays into an organic whole. The literary approach proposed by Frye in *Anatomy* was highly influential in the decades before deconstructivist criticism and other expressions of postmodernism. *Archetypal Criticism: The Theory of Myths* that forms the third essay has possibly been Frye's most influential contribution. He starts by identifying the four seasons- spring, summer, autumn and winter, with the four main plots or 'mythoi' of romance, comedy, tragedy, and irony/satire.

In the novel apart from the natural elements - flood, fire, storm and drought, the seasons of the year also play a key role in unfolding the plot. There is a strong parallel between the seasons of the year and the stages of life which the Parker family goes through. *The Tree of Man* has a symphonic construction. “ In four movements the pioneer couple Stan and Amy Parker are accompanied in their life and development through the stages of innocence, experience, death and reconciliation” (Bjorksten 47).

The fourness of the season and of the elements make up the foundation, in every movement a natural disaster creates a mystic crisis. This crisis changes the Parkers' search for what is constant and firm. His quest for permanence helps him to bear all the problems he faces in his life.

In *The Tree of Man* the spiritual quest, the inward journey in search of permanence or reality, is seen in terms of four archetypal stages - innocence, experience, hell and heaven. Innocence is associated with man's youth and with morning, the spring time and the honeymoon of marriage, its archetypal ordeal is flood. In the summer of life or the experience of the first years of adult maturity the archetypal ordeal includes fire and war. Parkers

experience personal failures. Stan cannot rescue a victim and Amy cannot hold back the boy they rescued from the flood. In summer of their life, fire not only destroys Glastonbury but also Amy's romantic opinion of Madeleine Armstrong. It also destroys Stan's escapist love for Madeleine, whom he rescues from the burning house.

Autumn is identified with the dry years of suffering, mental agony, loss of faith and an ordeal by drought. Stan has his spiritual death and the pain agony of war. Linked with autumn is the failure of parenthood. Finally winter arrives with stillness of life and death. Later this brief period of winter passes into early spring, that is Stan's recovery of faith and spiritual rebirth. The cycle continues with the life of Ray, the grandson of Stan Parker. Thus in this symphonic poem, the movements individually encompass lengthy periods of time and which as a whole extends over a lifetime, i.e. from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1950s.

The natural disasters in the four stages - storm, flood, fire and drought, signal the difference in the responses of Stan and Amy to nature. The incidents that happen in Parkers' life provide climatic reference to their lives; they also symbolize the emotional condition that they have reached at that point of time.

The flood brings out the self awareness of the Parkers in relation to the other people. The fire purges Stan of his romantic fantasies and he comes out of his sinful nature. Drought drains the Parkers of their physical strength but makes them wise and helps them to survive. The storm follows the visit of the peddler and threatens the existence of the Parkers. "The whole earth was in motion, a motion of wind and streaming trees, and he was in danger of being carried with it" (47).

Fear and annihilation grips them and they look unto God for deliverance. “ In this state he was possessed by unhappiness, rather physical, that was not yet fear, but he would liked to look up and see some expression of sympathy on the sky’s face” (47).

Stan sees God as a God of storm, floods, fire and disaster. Lightning is his mark in the sky. During storm Stan pushes thoughts about Amy to the back of his mind, “the form of his wife faded into insignificance” (150). Storm makes Stan humble and a new gentleness creeps into him. Stan is illuminated. But Amy Parker withdraws from storm, experiences fear and loses her child.

During flood unlike Amy who withdraws herself from nature’s fury, Stan moves across the waters as part of the rescue team. The half submerged world became familiar as his own thoughts. Flood opened new horizons in his mind. He accepts the ceaseless flux as the only permanence. But Amy tries to find permanence through the rescued child and tries to rush back home.

When fire breaks out in Glastonbury, it purges the thoughts of the Parkers as it burns away the landscape. As fire runs towards Durilgai, fear of death takes possession of them. Like the great flood, the fire is a force that runs all together in the trees, birds, animals and men, all into the state of flux.

Holding Madeline to his body, Stan “wished he could sink his face into her flesh, to smell it, that could part her breasts and put his face between” (180). This is the moment of Stan’s adultery committed not physically but in his heart. But when he carried her out of the burning house both singed, Stan comes out of his adulterous thoughts fire purged his sin.

During the years of drought Amy is desperate and frustrated and commits her desperate and gratuitous adultery with Leo, a commercial traveler. Later she realizes that she

has never been worthy of Stan. She comes out of her lust. Stan notices and is aware of Amy's adultery. There rises a storm in his mind. He contemplates killing himself but does not. The landscape provided consolation to his disturbed mind. He endures the tension. Both Stan and Amy accept each other mysteriously.

The novel ends with hope. The cycle of life and that of the seasons of the year continue with Ray, the grandson of the Parkers. The whole novel is a story interwoven with the seasons of the year in its background and the elements of nature intertwined with the events that occur in the novel. The landscape, season of the year and the mindscape are so synchronized that they blend perfectly and cannot be separated.

Works Cited

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