



DIVINE SPIRITUALITY SACRED IMAGERY IN “RIDERS IN THE CHARIOT”

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Abstract:

Patrick White's sixth novel, “Riders in the Chariot,” was published in the year 1961, after Voss and before *The Solid Mandala*. The novel is remarkable for its varied content, and once again White got the Miles Franklin Award for it. However, with the publication of this novel, White began to be seen as one of the great artists of Australia. It is set in White's imaginary Sydney, suburbs of Sarsaparilla, Barranugli and Paradise East. It is structured on a brilliant realization of the inner and outer lives of four “illuminates,” which unintentionally aspire for sainthood. These characters are social outcasts, i.e. “burnt ones.” As the title suggests these are the riders of a chariot sent by God himself. The use of these characters as protagonists of mystical themes is highly evocative. Mary Hare is a spinster, fond of nature; she was the owner of her father's dilapidated mansion, “Xanadu,” and stayed there. She can be compared to Theodora Goodman of *The Aunt's Story* in the sense of her solitariness. Mordecai Himmelfarb, a Jewish refugee was a survivor of the Nazi camps. He is also called the “suffering Messiah” that was tortured in a mock crucifixion by workers of the factory where he was working. Ruth Godbold, alias Mrs. Godbold, was really a strong preacher as the name suggests, this unpretentious workingwoman resembles Jullia Fallon of *The Living and the Dead*. This novel seems to be different from Patrick White's other novels in the sense that it primarily deals with Jewish and Christian mysticism. White sometimes uses the world religion to describe his world view. God consider him is a “Divine Power, a creator” who has an influence on human beings if they are willing to be open to him. He was brought up, as he said, a half-hearted Anglican, and then renounced the faith. One day during a season of unending rain at Castle Hill, he fell flat on his back in the mud, and started cursing a God that he had convinced himself did not exist. It was the turning point in his life. He does sense a God, but cannot associate his faith with churches.

Introduction:

White's had all along used symbols and images for various effects and purposes. In this novel, four characters, from different backgrounds, experience the same vision of riders in a chariot, independently. White himself first encountered the riders in a dealer's shop in Bond Street, London. The painting was by the French artist, Python. He had taken the subject from Eugene Delacroix's famous ceiling painting. Therefore, it can be said that White's *Riders in the Chariot* does not emerge from a spiritual or Christian tradition at all. It reaches back to the earlier moment of modern art. Redon's paintings confirm high art's power as an institution, first through the image's capacity to claim harmony and completeness, and secondly by its capacity to form traditions. White's characters in the novel see the riders as a spiritual experience. For White, art is the best way to affirm and communicate the spiritual. Here in this novel the image of the Chariot is pointed by Alf Dubbo the Aboriginal painter who also knows Redon's image. The concept of the Chariot comes to Mordecai Himmelfarb from his studies of ancient Rubbinical mystical works. Miss Hare experiences it through an almost non-human instinct for the otherness of the natural world of plant and animals. Mrs. Godbold it appears in an idiom appropriate to her nature.

Eleanor Smith, was the wife of Norbert Hare, and belonged to the family at Mumblejug. She was of discreet temper and indifferent health. Sir Dudley also belonged to the family at Mumblejug. He was the father of Eleanor and arrived in New South Wales during the nineteenth century to represent the Queen. He was renowned for his silk hats and horsemanship, and was an exemplary man. He had four daughters, three died before getting married. Miss Hare engaged Mrs Jolley, a widow in Melbourne, as housekeeper. She described herself as lady-capable. Mrs Colquhoun was a rich lady, who had recently come to live in Refer spell Sarsaparilla. Mrs Sugden was the Post Mistress. She was communicative and favoured an objective approach. Eustacea Cleugh, was a cousin of Miss Hare. She had visited Sarsaparilla very many years ago, before World War I. Returning again to Australia, to stay at Xanadu, was an astonishing experience for her. As has been said, Norbert Hare was a different sort of man. He conceived peculiar, almost quixotic plans, which could not always be executed: building a study at the top of a “Chinese Pagoda”, or stable in the shape of a mosque, or planting medlars. Once he brought some pieces of marble from Italy: mosaics for a bath, nymphs and vines and a big black malignant goat. Two Italian artisans were imported to fit the pieces. Norbert's grandest move caused people to bite their nails: his “building of folly” at Sarsaparilla outside Sydney, “Pleasure Dome,” “Xanadu” which was “brilliant and elegant.” It was created for the pleasure of the owner only. And was not built in a day of course, it cost time and patience, everybody grew exhausted; golden in a frill or two of iron lace, beneath the dove-grey thatching of imported states, its stables and bachelor quarters trailing out behind. He liked to climb up

through his house, often reaching the top, with its actual little dome made of glass. He used to spend his private hours there, reading the opening lines from his favourite poets, or just staring out over his own property. He had a daughter of his thoughts. She used to wear her father's bloodstone ring not as a moment to, but because it officially confirmed her ownership of Xanadu. Her father had always warned her when she attempted to play with the ring on his finger.

Mrs Hare was a religious lady. In answer to the frequent question arising in her mind as how her darling daughter must how repay her parents for all she owed them, she used to answer, "Only our Father in Heaven will be able to tell my pet why He made her as He did." Mrs Hare never liaised her eyes to God, except to invoke Him as a formal witness. She accepted Him as the creator of a moral and a social system. She herself was a social worker, a mouth-piece of social cliché as her husband accused her. She served the downtrodden girls of society materially and emotionally, and her name was published for everyone to read, on a visiting card, inserted on a brass frame on the end of her regular pew. This suggests her desire to show off which her husband and daughter disliked. Mary Hare, the little girl was not at all influenced by the attitudes of her mother; neither did she adopt them. "She drifted through the pale water of her mother's kindness like a little, wandering, transparent fish, in search of those depths, which her instinct told her could exist. She didn't want her parents to interfere in her matters. She wanted to look at, touch and smell whatever she saw, without the danger of being asked for explanations.

Father and daughter were two opposite sides of a pole, which could never be met. However, they understood each other. Once in the company of her father, she went to inspect a paddock. She threw herself on the ground, intentionally and began to roll in the grass, jerking her body and grunting foolishly, curling up her body like a bean or foetus. He could not ignore her activity, and in answer to his questioning expression she simply replied, now I know what it feels like to be a dog. He was shocked and disgusted by the answer. He ordered her to get up at once, and decided not to think about the incident again.

Mr Hare died during World War II, but most horribly by drowning in a cistern. Mrs Hare died at the beginning of the War after a prolonged illness. Peg, one of the servants, was a good, lovable character. Her character is compared to the transparency of glass and water through which one can see. Peg was always right, the way glass is and water—all that is blameless. The maid died before the death of Mrs Hare. William Hadkin, another minor character of the novel, used to live there in Xanadu as a coachman. He was deaf.

One morning Mary went in to Peg's room and found her servant-cum-friend lying on the bed motionless. She has been compared here with the very brittle, like a branch of one of the good-smelling herbs, rosemary, or lemon-scented verbena, which people used to break off and put away. With great effort, she dared to touch her, and realized that now she was indeed, alone in this world. The shock forced her to just keep standing in a corner of the room, staring. She thought of William Hadkin but the problem was that, she didn't like the deaf fellow although he remained faithful to her. However after the death of Mrs Hare he suddenly went away from Xanadu.

The last and worst encounter with William Hadkin occurred few weeks later. After the death of her maid. Peg, Mary came across him soon after he had very brutally killed a cock and detached the head of the bird from its body. William halted and saw the bird dance out of the last steps of life. Mary, a soft-hearted girl, stood pale, unable to move. She accused William of being a murderer. Soon after the incident he disappeared from Xanadu without informing anybody. At the time she felt relieved on considering herself free from any kind of bondage. She has been negatively portrayed. These malevolent middle-aged women went to the movies to confirm her belief in the importance of being a lady.

David J. Tacey regards Mrs Jolley to be the teeth mother; in a sense this archetypal figure is a guardian of human evolution, for if it were not for the devouring monsters of the deep, humanity would surely have succumbed long ago to the delightful prospect of eternal paradise. Though Miss Hare herself has invited this teeth mother to share her days in Xanadu, she regarded her as a foreigner, Mrs Jolley, on the other hand felt that she had equal rights in Xanadu. Like Amy Parker felt she had in Stan Parker's garden in *The Tree of Man* or Mrs Goodman in *Theodora's Meroe* in *The Aunt's Story*. The author considers her to be unregenerate evil, a creature from the primordial realm. She may be even called Miss Hare's hallucination. She would appear in doorways or from behind dividing curtains and cough, but very carefully, at certain times. She carried her eyes downcast.

Mrs Flack is another destructive female character, whom Miss Hare never met but whose presence she only imagined. This widow was a friend of Mrs Jolley. She met her on a bus outside the church. She resided at Middle Street. Mrs Jolley once presented her employer with a cake, on which the icing read for a bad girl. But Miss Hare could not comprehend what that implied. There are other clues also which suggest her hatred towards her employer. Still she remained unaware of the scarecrow image of her housekeeper and they lived to gather at Xanadu. Once Miss Hare remarked friendship is two knives. They will sharpen each other when rubbed together, but often one of them will slip and slice off a thumb. Norbert Hare had created many barriers for himself, which constantly troubled him, the construction of Xanadu itself being one because; it was a mere object of European extravagance. David J. Tacey thinks that by erecting such a proud and alien structure,

Norbert involves the destructive spirit of the land. Soon after the completion of this Pleasure Dome, it is seen that the native cynicism of the grey raggedy scrub begins to destroy his palace, and within a few years this Dome started disintegrating. The scrub, which had been pushed back, immediately began to tangle with Norbert Hare's wilfully created park, until, years later, there was his daughter, kneeling in a tunnel of twigs which led to Xanadu. Obviously, man cannot conquer nature permanently.

Himmelfarb here is considered to be the son-priest of Mother that she had escorted to a sacred place so that he may be enlightened with spiritual power. But it is striking that the Jewish mother appears to be undergoing some manifestation of Christ, the son being a mere carrier of her own spiritual side. The rabbi and her son, both appear to be extensions of her own-self. Thus Himmelfarb remained the son-priest of Mother Goddess throughout. Reha forced her husband to perform a powerful mythic role in of son priest. Her expectations induced in him a sense of powerlessness. Reha tried her level best to be discreet in her demands but she failed to convert him to a religious man. Later in the story it becomes evident that she hanged herself to death when she failed in her mission. She sensed the distance between aspiration and the possibility of achievement, and she was unable to do anything to help him. They would spend whole evenings of tranquil happiness in the library of the house on the Holzgrabben. While Himmelfarb read or corrected, his wife busied herself with sewing or knitting, usually for some other Jewish family as a kind of social service. Sometimes due to annoyance he didn't answer the questions his wife put to him. Both had very contradictory attitudes. Reha Himmelfarb considered non-living things useless because they could not make the end bearable, but for Himmelfarb, everything was a manifestation of God.

Himmelfarb was not ignorant of his religion, rather he was a Sceptic religion, like a winter overcoat, grew oppressive and superfluous as spring developed into summer, and the natural sources of warmth were gradually revealed. In spite of that, the love and respect that he had was everlasting. To develop some confidence in Judaism and the scriptures, his mother had arranged a special tutor for him. Cantor Katzmann, who taught him Hebrew alphabets, and he began shortly to write phrases, and recite prayers. Cantor himself was a humble man. He had several squint eyed children. He was a man of short height and his pupil loved him in memory, more than he had respected him in life. Himmelfarb had joined the gymnasium at the age often. He knew many languages other than English, like Greek, Latin, and French on the hole he preferred the English language. He was a brilliant student and had got many prizes in school. The Father at school used to call him not by his Jewish name, but Martin. He believed that Martin would surely become a man of some importance. On the other hand, his mother hoped that her child would be remembered as a man of faith. His triumph made him proud, shy, exalted, indifferent, explosively hilarious and incommunicative of his true feelings.

In the closed and ugly house, among relatives and friends, enlightened spiritually by the love and care of God, Mordecai accepted the pattern of his religion and race. But in addition to that there was an outside world, which his mother feared, would tempt her child. But his father yearned for it, and when the silent boy grew into a bony, rasping youth, he became absolutely aware of it. He made regular attempts to solve his own dilemmas. With the passage of time his proficiency in Hebrew increased, he would often read into the night. In the second decade of the century Mordecai Himmelfarb received his Doctorate in English, and shortly after, he was informed that he would be permitted to continue his studies at the University of Oxford. His father was overjoyed, not only because of the impression it would create, but because he too had a great affinity for the English language. He believed, as other members of his sect, that the world had changed. It was the earnest desire of both the parents, that God will recognize a good Jew. It is more important today that the world should recognize a good man. Moshe also held that all human beings would be divided into three categories; good, bad and indifferent, and the Jews will remain distinct from men.

Conclusion:

The dutiful son expressed great appreciation for his parents. He acknowledged his mother, whose guidance example and deeds might well redeem the whole race excepting one who is beyond redemption. At Oxford he excelled in academics. In the beginning he had restricted himself to books but later attracted others by his manners, and respect. He considered himself to be different from others. The sense of otherness was there may be because he was a Jew, a sect that considered themselves to be superior to the rest. Women were also attracted towards him. But Catherine was the only girl who fascinated him. People thought that they would get intimate and marry. But it was only infatuation. This polite girl was the daughter of a reprobate Earl. The young Jew, who loved the girl whole-heartedly, was terribly wounded one day when he caught her red-handed in a hotel bedroom with an Italian Prince. Later, she went abroad with her aunt for an indefinite period. From Florence she wrote him a letter of apology, but he couldn't forgive her and threw the half read letter into the dustbin as if he had tossed a ball. She continued to lead her life as per her temperament. She died in a bombing raid on a home for the drunk at Putney during World War II.

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