Towards a Methodology for a Comparative Study

Introduction

... there is, ..., no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have in common I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions.

(Helene Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa")

As for woman, capital W, we got stuck with that for centuries. Eternal woman. But really, 'woman' is the sum total of women. It doesn't exist apart from that, except as an abstracted idea.

(Margaret Atwood. "Interview with Geoff Hancock")
Arguably, the female protagonists occupy an important position in the fiction of Patrick White (Australia) and Margaret Laurence (Canada). Though critics have examined this aspect individually in the two writers, there has been no attempt at a comparative study of the two writers. This offers an occasion for the present study which uses a comparative cross-cultural interdisciplinary approach. Before moving on to examine the choice of writers, of works and the plan of the chapters to follow, it is worthwhile to consider the basis for this kind of study.

In this study, comparison operates at two levels. On the one hand, the thesis attempts to compare two writers of different cultures, nations and sexes. On the other hand, the study will draw attention to the underlying preoccupations of the two writers and the parallels that can be found in disciplines as different as philosophy, psychology and religion. Quoting Frederic Jameson, Ian Read in his article "The Need for a Comparative Method" emphasises the need to develop "a differential mode of perception" whereby an author and his/her works may be gauged against a historical sequence. This type of literary analysis "involves a to-and-fro oscillation between text and context, between the formal product and the formation process" (34).

Comparative studies of writers within the Commonwealth context is not a new phenomenon. In their book, The Empire Writes Back, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin classify such studies under three broad categories:
These are comparisons between countries of the White diaspora—comparisons between areas of the Black diaspora, and thirdly, those which bridge these groupings, comparing, say, literatures of the West Indies; with that of Australia (17).

Such studies have been possible mainly by focussing on the shared traits such as: (i) the colonial past (mainly the imperial-colonial relations and quite recently the process of decolonisation), (ii) the adaptation of a common tongue—English—to express the varied experiences, (iii) the multicultural perceptions available to readers and writers alike, and (iv) the "ex-centric" (Linda Hutcheon's term) or the marginalised position occupied by the New Literatures in English in relation to the mainstream British, American and European literatures. For example, Australian—Canadian studies, both individual and comparative, have repeatedly focussed on concepts such as the confrontation with alien landscapes, ‘colonial cringe’ (A.A. Phillips' term), ‘garrison mentality’ (Northrop Frye’s phrase), prison-paradise syndrome, two solitudes and mateship. Thus, the dominant critical trend is to use the above-mentioned factors as identity markers specific to a nation or culture and to emphasise the regional affinities of the writers. What is needed therefore, is to move beyond such commonly held critical opinions regarding cultures and provide "a broader base for investigating theoretical questions" (The Empire Writes Back 161) as also to develop "more comprehensive comparative models which argue for features such as hybridity and syncreticity as constitutive elements of all post-colonial literatures" (The Empire Writes Back 15). In his article "Reading for Resistance in the Post-colonial
Literatures," Stephen Slemon comments on the advantage of the above-mentioned method by citing Diana Brydon's work on English-Canadian rewritings of *The Tempest* as example and to quote him:

... [In Brydon's study] Canadian literature texts are assumed to be capable of reflecting a specific lived experience, and yet they are seen to do so through a cross-cultural and comparative framework that registers their difference not only from the imperial pre-text but also from their reiteration in another post-colonial culture (in *A Shaping of Connections* 105).

My study follows the aforesaid method. Thus, Patrick White and Margaret Laurence are not merely studied for their respective Australianness or Canadianness but how such identities influence their portrayal of certain concerns which they share.

The representativeness of both the writers aside, there have been considerable critical debates about the differences in the cultural, socio-political and literary developments of the two countries. As Diana Brydon rightly remarks, while precise documentation and examination of parallels and analogies may be a futile exercise, "by defining them one against the other," we may examine "what they share and where they diverge" (*Australian Literature and the Canadian Comparison* 155). For instance, though both the countries have been products of the colonial experience, they have worked out different solutions. This idea may be illustrated by comparing the evolution of the two societies. As Claude Bissell remarks, "Australians were conscious of themselves as Australians belonging to a distinctive society at a time when Canadians were only venturing to speculate about the emergence of a national feeling" (*A Common Ancestry:*
Literature in Australia and Canada." However, as Bissell points out, such contrasts may be seen as a case similar to Samuel Butler's Erewhon where the hero notices that "all things were generically the same as [at home], the differences being of species only" (133).

In spite of the shared colonial experience, formulating a cogent comparative criticism for the post-colonial literatures seems a formidable task, for there are numerous "variations between and within cultures." Syd Harrex and Guy Amirthanayagam ("Introduction: Notes Towards a Comparative Cross-Cultural Criticism") are of the view that "the lesson of India, with its happy or unhappy knack ... of embracing contradiction, perhaps offers one avenue of approach to the comparative critic" (22). In her essay, "Australian Literature and the Canadian Comparison," Diana Brydon considers it worthwhile to "study what has been written, and its critical reception, from within an interdisciplinary framework" (155). Affirming the same idea, Nick Wilkinson ("A Methodology for the Comparative Study of Commonwealth Literature") calls for a development of "critical tools which embrace the enormous diversity of background" and "capable of transcending the limitations of culture and race" (33).

Thus, the first task before the comparative critic is the need to openly discuss the similarities and differences alike of the writers and works concerned. Gillian Beer highlights the need for such an "inquisitorial" study (69) of women in the works of male and female writers in her article "Representing Women: Representing the Past." She points out how the differential reading enables readers to "specify" differences as also "to challenge
any notion of a sustained arc of progress in representing women; it will challenge also the notion of a stable archetypal order and prevent any "internalisation of gender constructions" (65). Another consideration seems to be the avoidance of the hegemony of Western critical theories. One way of doing this is by adapting the concepts in accordance with the situations (in this case, literary texts). Thus, no one critical stance is all-encompassing. As Helen Tiffin rightly remarks, "much contemporary theory, whatever its origin, offers us very useful insights if we seize them and make them over; interrogate their assumptions and biases before we employ them" (in A Shaping of Connections 125). Feminist and post-colonialist theories have to be re-defined in the context of different cultures even within the post-colonial situation. For instance, Patrick White and Margaret Laurence depict their characters within male-dominated societies. Though the female protagonists undertake quests for identities beyond those defined by familial or social roles, the fundamental thrust is not on "power politics" but on the spiritual/psychological quests to identify the self for oneself. Thus, an in toto application of the Images of Woman criticism (or any one feminist model) will not reveal the varied nuances of the texts and characters. Stating a similar idea, Diana Brydon concludes thus: "I'm not saying we must 'forget Foucault' (if such a thing were possible), but I am saying that Foucault cannot be applied to the new literatures in English like a bandage to a wounded Empire" (in A Shaping of Connections 90). Arguably, the use of interdisciplinary models may also entail a similar hegemony. An
eclectic and open approach to the texts and models alike may be of help in avoiding this trap. Brydon identifies two methods to approach various theories. One method "starts with experience and works outward to understand the ideological underpinnings of that experience" (in A Shaping of Connections 96) and the other "stresses certain basic similarities in order to understand differences" (in A Shaping of Connections 97). Both methods have their advantages and limitations. Thus, "the challenge is to negotiate the path between the excessive fragmentation of a narrowly specialised focus and the 'grand synthesis' of theories that effectively silence further questionings" (in A Shaping of Connections 98). In this thesis, I have combined both the methods mentioned above. Thus, the focus is mainly on the text and the implications that arise from the text. Where a particular model has been adapted, it is to reinforce the ideas found in the texts and to use the model as a common base to explore the differences between the texts and the writers. For instance, the Chapter on Self-Realisation uses some concepts underlying Vedanta and Existentialism. The Vedantic concepts highlight the active participation of the reader (an Indian) within the text and offer fresh interpretation. But, here, the use of existentialist ideas does not include the attendant nihilism that is central to this philosophical thought. Further, the link between Vedanta and Existentialism is brought out by using some of the ideas of the philosopher, J. Krishnamurti. Similarly, the Chapter on Individuation of Women uses some of the concepts of Carl Jung. While feminist studies of women focus on Freudian theories, here, an attempt is made to show the suitability of the Jungian theory.
Further, Jung's concepts have been used not merely as psychoanalytic tools for a thematic study, but to examine the underlying structure of the quest shared by the protagonists and which can be discerned in the Jungian theory.

Let us now consider the choice of writers in some detail. There is a wide range of critical readings on the works of White and Laurence individually. Therefore, this thesis is not so much an attempt to identify new themes or techniques in the works (though, this has been done to a certain extent in Chapters Three, Four and Five), but to examine how the two writers share some common preoccupations. However, the differences in perceptions and presentations have to be borne in mind. Before discussing the preoccupations underlying the fictional matrix of the two writers which justify my choice and which forms the main body of this thesis, it is worthwhile to examine the shared position of the two writers within the post-colonial context and in relation to feminism.

The emergence of post-colonial literatures is broadly marked by three stages: (i) colonial (imitation), (ii) nationalist (rebellion) and (iii) post-colonial (assimilation). By virtue of their life span, years spent abroad and their views on writing, White and Laurence fit into the third category, thus assimilating what is available outside their own cultures. Patrick White (1912-1990) has the European tradition open to him through his education in England and his travels to France, Germany and Greece. Margaret Laurence (1928-1987) has the advantage of staying in England and travelling to Somaliland and Ghana. The
African years have given her a first hand experience of what it means to be a go-between in the colonial situation. Also, educationally, their common background is English and European literatures. (In fact, Laurence has commented on her literary background and states how the only Canadian novel she read was Sinclair Ross' *As For Me and My House*). Arguably, both White and Laurence are writing in response and resistance to English literary genres and conventions.

Further, in their approaches to writing, both White and Laurence avoid the extremes of viewing the post-colonial text either as a "natural' reflection of post-colonial social reality" or as a "reactive mechanism" to colonial discourse (Stephen Slemon in *A Shaping of Connections* 107). In their fiction, both writers are engaged in the creation of a new reality which is in complementary (not contradictory) relation to both the colonial resistance and post-colonial ex-centricity and which is beyond the basic binaries--self/other, black/white, centre/periphery etc.--inherent in the other two categories. The reality underlying the novels and the vision embraced by the artists afford a comfortable coexistence of past and present, history and fiction, indigene and settler in their fiction. Such an attitude enables the two writers to move beyond the constraints of national, cultural and sexual identities. Thus, the national (regional) markers are used to present a larger scheme of things. This idea will be elaborated in the concluding Chapter where an overview of this idea in relation to the entire fictional range of the two writers will be examined.
Since this thesis is a study of women in the fiction of White and Laurence, a brief account of the feminist affiliations of the two writers is appropriate. Both White and Laurence seem to emphasise the idea which is described by Robin Matthews as "the liberation of women [which] is not a liberation into 'free' rejection of men, community, and nation, but into a state of increased equality and harmony with men and a humanized and liberated participation in community and nation" (Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution 139). In his essay, "Politics and A Jest of God." Kenneth James Hughes remarks that "Laurence is a liberationist, not simply a women’s liberationist" (46). This remark finds its echo in White's defense against the charge that he is a misogynist in his autobiography, Flaws in the Glass:

In life I have known far more admirable women than admirable men. Those who have read my novels attentively, not just glanced through one or two of the more controversial at a time when they were conversational fodder for dinner parties, must surely have seen this. Of course, my women are flawed because they are also human beings ... (252).

These remarks are pertinent to my study because the metaphysical and spiritual aspects of the quests do not involve the battle of sexes. The point I wish to make is that at the precise moment of self-realisation (in the metaphysical sense), sex and gender distinctions cease to exist. This assertion can be tested in the similar quality of the moments of illumination experienced by the male protagonists in White's novels. The quest for self-realisation involves the paring away of the superficial layers of existence (including sex and gender roles) by both men and women alike. The implications of this break away movement are very well
captured in the following statement of Laurence quoted in Margaret Atwood's essay "Face to Face":

I am 90% in agreement with Women's Lib. But I think we have to be careful here ... for instance, I don't think enough attention has been paid to the problems men have and are going to have increasingly because of the changes taking place in women. Men have to be reeducated with the minimum of damage to them. These are our husbands, our sons, our lovers ... we can't live without them, and we can't go to war against them. The change must liberate them as well (in George Woodcock ed. A Place to Stand On 23).

Commenting on the strong women and weak men characters in his novels, White concludes that "women are certainly more interesting" even without the shrillness of radical feminism (Flaws in the Glass 130).

However, White and Laurence may be termed feminists in the creation of women who are not stereotypical images like Angel in the House, She-Devil, devoted spouse, beautiful temptress, healing Madonna or seductive siren-like destroyer. Thus, we come across positive portrayals of women who are spinsters, intellectuals and artists. Both White and Laurence dramatise "how a woman finds the fullest possible expression of her personality by transcending the conventional barriers of sex." Their fiction, in P.P. Sharma's words, explicates "the distinction between what women are and what they are made to look like" ("From Stereotype to Authentic Selfhood: Changing Images of Women" 3). The interest of the two writers in sexual politics is limited to viewing it as "the dialectical struggle between the two sides of the self [which] is the fundamental rhythm of human existence" (Veronica Brady in Who is She? Images of Woman in Australian Fiction 180).
While Laurence insists on a proper understanding of the other half of humanity, White constantly strives to present an androgynous vision. In Patrick White, the culmination of the androgynous ideal can be found in the figure of the transvestite E.Twyborn in The Twyborn Affair. In his autobiography, Flaws in the Glass, White states that the best personality emerges "from the masculine principle in ... women, the feminine in ... men" (155). However, there is a notable difference in emphasis. Whereas White stresses the ideal combination of the masculine and feminine, Laurence focusses on women and the feminine even while emphasizing the need to understand men and the masculine principle. Though White and Laurence break down barriers of sex and gender by using different methods, they attempt to present "the whole of experience" which is described by David Malouf as "the mystery of what we have not yet become" (qtd. in S.A. Ramsey's "The Twyborn Affair": "the beginning in an end" or "the end of a beginning" 89). White and Laurence refer to the condition Malouf talks of as "pureness of being" and "mystery at the core of life" respectively and this is the goal towards which the quests of the female protagonists are directed.

There are certain other preoccupations/themes which contribute to the quest for self-realisation and which also form the basis of comparison of the two writers. Let us examine these ideas in some detail. To begin with, almost all the protagonists are portrayed as "ordinary" women with a potential to assert their individuality. This idea subscribes to White's statement in "The Prodigal Son" about his attempts "to discover the extra-
ordinary behind the ordinary" (Patrick White Speaks 15). Echoing this idea is Clara Thomas' statement about Laurence's characterisation where "an "ordinary" person is revealed as extraordinary by the power and imaginative range of [the] inner life" (in George Woodcock's A Place to Stand On 100).

The novels are testimonies of the struggles faced by women to define their individual selves within male-dominated cultures. Both White and Laurence at times use subversive methods to question the prevalent myths which are "male oriented." However, there is a slight difference in presentation. In White's fiction, the movement away from society is glaring whereas in Laurence's fiction, women seem to work within social restrictions. The quests for individual identity are marked by the conflict between the inner and the outer selves (true and false selves) of the protagonists. From this initial conflict arises dualities which are neatly summed up by John Colmer as those between freedom and conformity, "mind and body, matter and spirit, male and female, the individual and society, time and eternity, the Word and the Flesh, the wisdom of silence and the folly of speech" (Ron Shepherd and K. Singh ed. Patrick White: A Critical Symposium 71). While the dichotomy between outer and inner selves has received considerable critical attention, it is interesting to study the forging of synthesis between the two aspects by the two writers. According to Carol Christ, "women's quest seeks a wholeness that unites the dualisms ... which have plagued Western consciousness" (Diving Deep and Surfacing 8). Such a stance offers fresh insights. For instance, a visionary in White and Laurence is presented almost always as an outcast or an outsider.
Such withdrawals mark the alienation of the individual from society which entails a certain existential anguish of isolation as also a breakdown of communication. Both the writers present their characters as adopting values which are different from those of the society they live in and as rejecting the commonly accepted social values. White emphasises the aspect of alienation forcefully, thus inviting the comment that he is a misanthropist (cited in John Beston's "The Effect of Alienation on the Themes and Characters of Patrick White and Janet Frame" 133). Laurence stresses the breakdown of communication even while calling for the need to reach out to other individuals. (She comments on this aspect of Chinua Achebe’s novels in her book, Long Drums and Canons). While it is true that almost all the protagonists withdraw from society, their rebellion against social conventions is not a negative phenomenon because it serves as an occasion for the protagonists to understand themselves. [For instance, the visionary moments of Laurence's protagonists (Eg. Rachel's speaking in tongues in A Jest of God and Stacey's apocalyptic visions in The Fire-Dwellers) are normalised in the narratives.] Such a reading enables one to defend the statement that White is a misanthropist (for example) as also study the attempts made by the writers to forge a synthesis between the binaries. A direct consequence of this is the acceptance and return of some of the protagonists to their roles within society. While almost all the heroines in Laurence's fiction reach this stage of acceptance, in White such reconciliation is evident from Riders in the Chariot and The Eye of the Storm onwards. Thus, the "inner" quest is not
so much an alternative to existing reality which entails a certain break or **schism from** the outer reality. **The** quest provides an extra-dimension to existing reality and offers **scope** for continual additions to the available experiences. Echoing a similar idea in her book, *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, Carol Christ points out that women's quest offers suggestions for social change and "**looks** forward to the realization of spiritual insight in social reality--the integration of spiritual and social quests" (14).

The quest for self-realisation is marked by the protagonists' urge to be free. In the fictional context of the two writers, 'freedom' does not imply political freedom but has a broader implication which encompasses the metaphysical dimension as well. Citing "**Godman’s Master**" (The *Tomorrow-Tamer* collection), Laurence remarks that freedom means "the individual coming to terms with his own past and with himself, accepting his limitations and going on from there, however terrified he may be... . This kind of inner freedom has been a continuing theme" (in Donald Cameron ed. *Conversations with Canadian Novelists* 98). Thus, freedom is not merely the escape from assigned roles but a kind of inner freedom which is spiritual and psychological. The quest to be free and to realise the self necessitates the need to make a choice and take the responsibility for it. Along with these existential thoughts, White and Laurence stress on the need for "humility, simplicity and suffering" as the essential conditions for self-realisation. These ideas will be elaborated in the Chapter on **Self-Realisation**.
The quests undertaken by almost all the protagonists reveal one characteristic trait shared by them i.e., their instinct for survival. As Laurence puts it, survival does not mean "just physical survival, but the preservation of some human dignity and in the end some human warmth and ability to reach out and touch others" (in A Place to Stand On 18). It was A.D. Hope who derogatorily portrayed Australians as 'the last men whose boast is not of living but surviving.' But a deeper thinking reveals the triumph involved in surviving the odds posed by the alien environment and restrictive society. The struggle for survival itself seems to enhance the quality of living.

The quest for self-realisation is marked by certain shared traits of the protagonists viz., their questioning of accepted social values, withdrawal from society, urge to be free and the instinct for survival. Almost all these concerns can be discerned in the entire fictional range of the two writers. However, only some of the novels will be taken up for detailed analysis in the thesis. They are: The Aunt’s Story (1948), Voss (1957), Riders in the Chariot (1961), The Eye of the Storm (1973), A Fringe of Leaves (1976), The Twyborn Affair (1979) and Memoirs of Many in One (1986) by Patrick White and The Stone Angel (1964), A Jest of God (1966), The Fire-Dwellers (1969), The Diviners (1974) and the short story collection A Bird in the House (1970) (which will be treated as a unified whole) by Margaret Laurence. The reasons for this selection are as follows:

(i) This selection focusses on fiction with female protagonists and where women share the lead roles with men as in Voss and Riders in the Chariot. This focus excludes: (a) novels with male
protagonists (Eg., The Tree of Man and The Vivisector) though there are some powerful and well-delineated female characters in these works and (b) novels which focus on the feminine element in men. For instance, Arthur Brown in The Solid Mandala is presented as the feminine counterpart of Waldo.

(ii) The texts where other concerns dominate have been left out. Laurence's African fiction (This Side Jordan and The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories) also deals with themes such as freedom and survival but their focus is limited to the colonial predicament. Though this aspect has not been developed in the thesis, the roles played by the natives in the lives and quests of the protagonists will be examined. Where these works echo the later works, cross-references will be made. In the analysis of White's works, a detailed account of the male visionaries will not be included. However, comparisons and contrasts will be made at appropriate points.

(iii) The gallery of women in the works of both the writers is exceedingly large. The minor characters have been included only as points of comparison or contrast. For instance, the socially successful women will be discussed as providing foils to the protagonists (Eg., Belle Bonner to Laura, Fanny to Theodora and Grace to Rachel). Some characters will be studied as juxtapositions or helpers of the protagonists. Examples include Rose Portion's role in Laura's quest and Calla's role in Rachel's life. Sometimes a group of minor characters come under the influence of the main characters. The influence of Elizabeth Hunter on Sister de Santis, Flora Manhood and Lotte Lippmann may
be cited as an example. This also includes the roles played by men in the lives of the protagonists. Thus, several men in Morag’s life figure as animus images and diviners. They are Christie Logan, Jules Tonnerre, Brooke Skelton, Dan McRaith and Royland.

The plan of the thesis is as follows:

In the First Chapter "Women in Familial Roles," the protagonists will be analysed in terms of their roles within the family as daughters, lovers, wives and mothers. The main aim of the chapter will be to analyse the conflict arising out of the ‘real’ selves of the protagonists as against their fixed roles in the family.

In order to break free of the familial restrictions, some of the protagonists take on roles as teachers and artists. The Second Chapter. "Women in Social Roles" will elaborate this idea. The metafictional possibilities arising out of the portrayal of characters as artists will also be examined. The focus of the chapter will be a study of the identity crisis arising out of the conflict between personal and social roles.

The Third Chapter. "Women and the Quest for Self-Realisation" is divided into two major sections. The first Section "Against Religion" will discuss the various reactions of the protagonists (from acceptance to total disregard) to conventional religion (Christianity). This Section has been included to emphasise the distinction between religiosity and spirituality, made by the writers and characters. The second Section on self-realisation will study the spiritual and religious implications
of the quests. The set of frames used in the chapter include some aspects of 
[Vedānta] and [Existentialism].

The **Fourth Chapter** "Individuation of Women in Patrick White and Margaret Laurence" will explore the **self-awareness** of the protagonists in the Jungian sense. Apart from tracing the use of Jungian ideas by the two writers, a common structure found in the quests will also be analysed. This analysis easily lends itself to a study of the mythical and archetypal patterns inscribed in the quests.

Though themes and techniques are neatly dovetailed in the fiction of the two writers, the **Fifth Chapter** will be devoted to the study of hitherto unexplored techniques. This Chapter will analyse two techniques which have been identified for this purpose and which highlight the themes explored in the rest of the thesis. The concepts are Doubling and **Time**. (i) Doubling and fragmentation include techniques like multiple narrators, use of masks, guises and disguises and mirror **images**. (ii) The circular nature of Time and the co-existence of past, present and future in the novels will be discussed in terms of Nicholas Berdyaev's categories, the aboriginal notion of Alcheringa and Patricia Tobin's concept of time as a genealogical imperative. The techniques explored will include memory as a mode, flashback and flashforward devices and the prologue-like opening chapters of some of the novels.