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Aboriginal and European Relationships in *Voss*, *A Fringe of Leaves*, and *Riders in the Chariot*

in terms of Homi Bhabha's Theories of Hybridity, In-Betweenness, and Third Space

Deniz Cansiz

The Australian continent, which has been home to the Indigenous people of the land for thousands of years, had been falsely labelled as 'terra nullius' by the European explorers to justify their colonial missions, even though they knew the land had native inhabitants. The mission of the European settlers to establish a penal colony for Britain concluded with them delegitimizing the validity of the Indigenous population's existence in Australia, resulting in a negative outcome for the lives of the Indigenous people who had a very deep physical and spiritual

connection to the land. After their thousands of years of autonomy in the land, the Indigenous people were degraded to lesser roles in the land, having to “conform to an identity created for them in advance of [the Europeans’] entry into [the continent]” (Reynolds 69). The racial oppression faced by the Indigenous people of Australia was a result of the ideas brought by the Europeans, like the binary oppositions with which they divided the world into two, as their idea of the perfect and civilized white society needed the concept of an uncivilized and backward society to oppose it. Patrick White, as an Australian author whose interests lie in the spiritual state and the need of a national identity of White Australia, focuses on the dichotomy between the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia and the European settlers, as the binary oppositions between the two cultures and their relationships are in the core of Australian history. White, through his analysis of the fictionalized struggles and experiences of characters in his works *The Fringe of Leaves*, *Voss*, and *Riders in the Chariot*, creates a medium for the reader to understand the similar and different aspects of Aboriginal and European cultures. Additionally, as a postcolonial Australian writer, by rendering the interchanges between two different cultures possible, he lets the reader psychologically and genetically examine hybrid figures that are a reality of colonial Australia. This study will, through the theories of Homi K. Bhabha, investigate the process in which hybrid figures are created in colonised nations while examining the effects of hybridity and in-betweenness on the psyche of both Aboriginal and European characters in the selected works of Patrick White.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of hybridity coined by the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha occupies a very important place in the postcolonial discourse. It could be argued that hybridity is an inevitable consequence of the colonial practices as it is born out of the interactions of the colonised and the coloniser. The hybrid people, as figures who carry the cultural or genetic materials from both sides of the colonial spectrum, could be said to be creating an opposition to the binary thinking as they do not fit into the essentialist thoughts. Bhabha, in his work *The Location of Culture*, defines hybridity as:

[A] sign of productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces, and fixities; it is the name for strategic reversal of the process of domination through

disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects (159).

Cultural hybridity as a theory exists to describe the effects that being situated in conditions of colonial antagonism and binary opposition have over the construction process of cultures and identities of societies, and it is taken from literary and cultural theory (182). Hybridity, according to Bhabha, is "celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of cultures, and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference" in the postcolonial discourse (158). As hybrid identities emerge from the interrelations of the coloniser and the colonised, their existence, owing to the fact that they carry the cultures of two different societies, forms a strong antithesis against essentialist cultural identity. As Fuss states, "the belief in invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness of a given entity' is exactly what Bhabha's theory of hybridity opposes" (XI). Bhabha accepts hybridity as a form of being that has been situated in an in-between space, where the "cutting edge of translation and negotiation" is set in, which he calls the third space (Bhabha 269, Rutherford 210). So, what Bhabha defines as the third space is a metaphysical space where newly formed cultures born out of the cultural transactions of two different cultures blur the limitations set by the established culture and identity based on the categorisation and the binary oppositions of the colonial centre. He explains his theory of third space in an interview as follows:

For me, the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'Third Space,' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority (Rutherford 211).

According to Bhabha, this hybrid third space is an ambivalent site where cultural meanings and representations have no "primordial unity or fixity," and it can be said that Patrick White, in his works, physically shapes out this ambivalent third space in the form of the Australian desert, where the autonomy of both the Aboriginal Australians and Europeans do not persist (55).

There have been other writers inspired by Homi K. Bhabha's arguments regarding hybrid identities that emerge in colonial and postcolonial societies. These writers, like Bhabha himself argues in his works, discuss this third space as a middle ground between two opposing cultures. A postcolonial writer, Law, discusses in her work that third space is important in cultures as an in-between space that works to negotiate the hegemonic practices and the dualistic colonial binary thinking (109). Another postcolonial writer, Papastergiadis, defines the hybrid identities that are positioned within this third space as a "lubricant" between two cultures as they can transverse both cultures with counter-hegemonic actions, destroying the binary thinking of the colonial systems, and work as a bridge between two different cultures and races (261). As a continent that has been home to the Aboriginal Australians for thousands of years, the arrival of the European people proved to be a destabilising factor for both the ancient traditions of the Aboriginal people and the European identity on this new and harsh land. So, analysing the interactions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters in Patrick White's works might, for that reason, unearth the process in which the hybrid figures are created and the general effects of hybridity and being situated in an in-between third space over the psyche of a nation, as well as of individuals from different cultures. In the rest of the article, by using Bhabha's theories of hybridity and third space as a critical lens, this paper will examine the intercultural relations and its results.

Hybridity in *Voss*, *A Fringe of Leaves*, and *Riders in the Chariot*

Although the binary oppositions were set by the colonizers to perpetuate their colonial dominance in the lands they claimed, the results may turn out in a way they might not have anticipated. Homi K Bhabha, in his work *The Location of Culture*, talks about his theory, which is directly related to the lives of people whose racial identities are formed in societies where there are clashes between a coloniser and a colonised group. As a result of this clash between two societies, hybrid identities that carry the cultural values and biological characteristics of the two opposing groups emerge. So, the idea of

a fixed identity that has been at the core of colonial discourse is challenged. Patrick White focuses his writing on the effects of being a member of a colonial society over individuals as a writer whose fiction usually discusses the state of the Australian psyche at a critical time in the history of the continent when it was trying to establish itself as an independent country in the political world, rather than a part of the British commonwealth. Although there was a concern for establishing Australia itself as an independent nation, there was also a concern for establishing a unique Australian culture in an environment where there was still a clash of cultures. Therefore, the importance of examining both the Indigenous and European characters' experiences and relationships together to have a better understanding of the emergence of new cultures from two existing cultures cannot be denied.

Patrick White, in his works *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*, creates a narrative where he relocates the European outsiders in changing physical and psychological states, especially by their relocation in the Australian desert. The vast and empty desert of Australia is a place that could be considered to be a neutral space that enables the negotiation between European and Indigenous characters. These characters who have been relocated, through their interactions with the Indigenous people, have a change of consciousness. Johan Ulrich Voss and Ellen Roxburgh, the protagonists of *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves* respectively, undergo a complete transformation of mind. They turn into hybrid figures who grow a better understanding of the otherized people in their cultures through their sufferings and experiences in the untamed landscape of Australia, which could be interpreted as Patrick White's physical projection of the metaphysical third space between the European world of understanding where they belong and the Aboriginal world they have been thrown into. Unlike *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves* where the white European protagonists travel into the Black world, intentionally or unintentionally, *The Riders in the Chariot* focuses on the story of a half Indigenous, half European person who has already been displaced into the whitened and Europeanized world because, as a part of the 'stolen generation' of Australia, Alf Dubbo has already been taken away from his Indigenous tribe and his ties with his Indigenous roots. Just like the other characters, Voss and Roxburgh, who suffer in the Indigenous world, Alf Dubbo, in *Riders in the Chariot*, suffers as a half-Black person at the hands of the white people who adopt him. He gets abused and exploited in the white world under the guise of benevolence, paralleling the benevolent guise of the colonizing European.

In the first two novels, Patrick White dives deep into colonial Australian history, but in the third novel, *Riders in the Chariot*, he discusses and criticizes the society of contemporary Australia. In *Riders in the Chariot*, the dominance of white identity has already been established in the continent, and while White examines the socially and spiritually hybridised characters in *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*, with Alf Dubbo of *Riders in the Chariot*, he examines a biologically hybrid character that challenges the binary oppositions better than the cultural hybridity. The blackness of the half-Black Dubbo, in a land that was once the home of the Indigenous people but now dominated by European culture, causes him to be alienated from the white-dominant society. As his blackness alienates him from the white-dominant society, the fact that he has been taken away from his Indigenous tribe at a young age means that he can never go back to his tribe as a person who has not been through the initiation process of the Indigenous people. In the whitened world he is alienated to, with his memories of his childhood in an Indigenous tribe with his Indigenous mother, he is in a state of in-betweenness. Healy talks about Dubbo in his work as such:

In the beginning, he is himself a torn creature, caught between the imposed abstractions of Mr. Calderon's Christ and the rich but discrete memories of youth in an Aboriginal community (201).

Patrick White, through the character of Alf Dubbo, who is biologically a hybrid of White and Black societies, fictionalizes the struggles of the unfortunate members of Australia's 'lost generation.' As a part of the 'lost generation,' Dubbo's experiences of feeling like he does not belong in any place are also depicted throughout the novel, directly showing the experiences of a person who is in a state of hybridity. Dubbo is depicted as a person who has "always been at war" (437). His war is waged against his own hybrid nature that attracts the racist attitudes of the society along with his feeling of alienation from both the White and the Black world. Dubbo is torn between his Indigenous roots and his life in the white-dominated world where he does not feel welcomed. In one part of the novel, Dubbo reflects on his hybrid nature and the complexities it brings to his life as follows:

His mind was another matter because even he could not calculate how it might behave, or what it might become once it was set free. In the meantime, it would keep jumping and struggling, like a fish left behind in a pool—or two fish, since the white people, his guardians had dropped another in (437).

This quote directly shows the struggle and confusion of Dubbo about his own identity. As it has already been stated in the theoretical framework section of this work, hybridity is celebrated for its ability and power to reverse the discriminatory effects caused by ideas of fixed racial identities formed in colonial settings. Although this power is good in one sense, after seeing the psychological state of the half-caste Alf Dubbo, it cannot be denied that the same binary oppositions that the hybrid figures' existence disrupts also cause them to feel a cultural and existential cringe, owing to the fact that their non-binary existence does not fit into the binary thinking of the world.

Throughout his life, although he is half white, he shows a resistance to the pressures of white culture that try to destroy and disregard his Black side. In the novel, Dubbo has a black tin box in which he puts everything meaningful in his life:

Everything he did, any fruit of his own meaningful relationship with life, he would lock up in a tin box, which grew dented and scratched as it travelled with him from job to job, or lay back and secret underneath his bed, while he played the part of the factory-hand or station roustabout. Nobody would have thought of opening that box. Most people respected the moroseness of its owner, and a few were even scared of Dubbo (427).

The black tin box, hidden under his bed and "dented and scratched," could be seen as a physical representation of his Indigenous self, hidden away and harmed. Although he resists the white culture, the only thing he gets from the white world is his skill in painting that he acquires from one of his white guardian families, but even when he is made to paint the figure of Jesus Christ, he immediately portrays him as a darker man, contributing a part of his Aboriginal spirit into his art. Despite the fact that he hides his hurt Indigenous side in the white-dominated world, his dual existence affects his life in every way.

Even though they do not face the same kind of racism Dubbo faces, just like Dubbo, Johan Ulrich Voss and Ellen Roxburgh are also alienated in their white-dominated societies. Although Voss is German, he is seen as an outsider by the white aristocratic society of Australia, with people commenting that he is a peculiar person who has no place in the colonial Sydney society. Just like him, Mrs. Roxburgh too has been otherized and alienated by the aristocratic British society and has been called a British 'savage' on many occasions. Long before her hybrid identity comes out during her time with the Indigenous

people, her marriage with the aristocrat Austin Roxburgh transforms her from a farm girl from Cornwall to a 'proper' lady. Her origins as a farm girl distance her from the British and Sydney society, and another character in the novel, Miss Scrimshaw talks about Ellen's home, Cornwall as "a remote country . . . of dark people" and says "I cannot remember ever having been on intimate terms with any individual of Cornish blood. All my family were fair" (16). So, even from the start, these two non-Aboriginal characters could be argued to be closer to the otherized Indigenous people than they are to the Centre, the aristocratic class of Sydney. Voss even thinks of the Indigenous people as "his people'," seeing himself as a part of their society and looks at the land and the people in a different way than the traditional colonizer figure would do (250). This state of being in between two cultures creates a space for these characters to empathise with the Indigenous people, owing to the fact that, although in different contexts, they go through similar experiences.

It cannot be denied that in the history of colonialism, the figure of the explorer has been a very important one. Although the figure of explorer, especially in colonial societies, has been connotated with heroism, when this figure is analysed through a postcolonial perspective, it may be viewed as an invader whose actions are merely for further dominion and power of Europe, although he has been masked with heroic intentions. So, Patrick White's use of the figure of an explorer in *Voss* is quite ironic, and important, as the protagonist of the novel in the end, through the course of the novel, turns from a simple explorer who is only there for colonial purposes to a figure that has become closer to the Indigene. White cites the journals of the Prussian explorer Ludwig Leichhardt as his basis for *Voss*.

Another apparent resemblance between the journals of Leichhardt and the process of hybridisation in the fictional works studied in this work is the power of sharing food as a way of forming connections in societies. In Ludwig Leichhardt's journals, there are many examples of white people eating food like lizards, snakes, and other creatures that they would not have normally consume in their 'civilized' world, in order to survive. In *Voss*, when the titular character, in the climactic moment of the novel where the transformation of Johan Ulrich Voss has been completed, has the witchetty grub placed on his tongue, he, in a way, becomes one with the Indigene. When the journals of Leichhardt are examined, it is impossible not to notice the racial differences that divide the two groups, the Indigenous people and the European explorers, become increasingly weaker and the lines that

separate the Black and White groups get blurrier, as during their expedition into the desert, they are all equally subjected to the mercy of the desert and nature, and this causes them to be on equal grounds. In the journals, Leichhardt and his group get lost on one occasion, and they eat lizards. The food, which the white man would not have ever considered feeding on in normal circumstances or in his normal environment, suddenly becomes essential for his survival in the desert. It cannot be disregarded that the act of sharing food is a form of bonding in human communication, and Ellen Roxburgh's assimilation into the Indigenous society is also constantly shown to the reader through the motif of food in *A Fringe of Leaves*.

An important argument of colonial Britain for a long time was the myth of the cannibal native. They would use this myth to justify their imperial and colonial actions to bring 'salvation and culture' to the people whom they deemed as 'savages.' At one point of the novel, Ellen participates in the cannibalistic ritual of the Indigenous tribe, and it is again a climactic point for her process of hybridization and transformation into a half-Indigene. In this section, Patrick White clearly separates the practice of cannibalism performed by White and Black people in the novel, with the Indigenous people's practice of it being a form of ritual cannibalism that is not a natural or persistent part of their diet; instead, it is the white people who are shown as the ones who indulge in a form of cannibalistic behaviour that is simply the "abomination of human behaviour" as said by Ellen in the novel (299). This reversal of the myth of the cannibal native again provides the reader with a question of who the savage and who the civilized is and who decides on the identity of the two.

Ellen's process of hybridization also goes on with her involvement in the female rituals of the tribe. Her identity as a Cornish farm girl who has later been transformed into an English lady is again highlighted through her being reminded of her rituals in the farm while she is attending the tribal rituals. When her past and present states have been examined, one can state without a doubt that Ellen's life as a farm girl before her transformation into a British lady is closer to the Indigenous way of life than to her life in the aristocratic British society. Although she is an outsider, Ellen even fully participates in the corroboree, a celebration of the Indigenous tribes, and at that moment, she sees "the sudden vision of Mr. Roxburgh," as if, in the form of her late husband, the ghost of her European colonial identity is calling her back from the process in which she is becoming more like the Indigene, but it

is not enough to prevent her from taking part in the ritual (311). Later, when she is talking to the Commandant, in response to his question, “Did you take part in their corroboree?” she answers, “Oh yes, I joined in, because I was one of them” (399). For the Commandant, whose mind works in a binary system that has fixed expectations of races, the notion of a lady of a high-class society taking part in the ‘primitive’ rituals of the Indigenous people is out of the question, but Ellen forms an opposition to the binary thinking and forms or even turns into a bridge between the European and Indigenous world. Ellen is even physically transformed to resemble the Indigenous people. She is totally stripped of her clothes, with her skin blackened and her hair completely chopped away, and in her time with the Indigenous tribe, she leaves her European clothes and looks and physically becomes someone closer to the Indigene.

Patrick White, through the experiences of the convict figures as well as Voss and Mrs. Roxburgh, shows the reader how an otherized European person is closer to the Indigenous people. Both Ellen and Voss draw parallels to their homelands when they first go into the inner parts of Australia, where the Indigenes live. Even before he goes into the wilderness and his process of change begins, Voss reprimands the local people because of their rejection of the native landscape saying, “A pity you huddle [...] your landscape is of great subtlety” (12). And his words suggest that the change from a foreigner to Indigene has already started as he says, “I am at home. It is like the poorer parts of Germany. It could be Mark Brandenburg” (12). There is also a parallel drawn between the convicts and the Indigenous people in the novels. In *Voss*, through the character of Judd the convict, whose rejection from his home in imperial Britain and the fact that he gets sent away to Australia as a convict positions him as an outcast in the colonial world that has been constructed by the Europeans. Judd states in the novel if a person lives and suffers in a place for long enough, that person never leaves it for good, as their spirit will still be there (539). What this convict, Judd, suggests in this part of the novel is simply the summary of the hybridization process that Voss goes through in the novel. The white convict figure in *A Fringe of Leaves*, Jack Chance, is also seen as an Indigenous person in the tribe. The readers see that Jack Chance has mastered the language of the Indigenous tribe he is living with and has also absorbed their culture and seems to be speaking his native language again with great effort in one part of the novel. He is so alienated to the society he was banished from so much that he says that “men are unnatural

and unjust" (309). He views the colonial society that banished him as unjust people, rejecting his chance to go back.

Towards the end of *Voss*, at the moment of his death, the titular characters' blood flows directly into the land, making him merge with the Australian land physically after his spiritual connection and hybridization has been completed. After Voss' death, Judd says, "His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately" (480). This comment of Judd, the convict, on this event adds more to this connection. He later says, "Voss left his mark on the country. The blacks talk about him to this day. He is still there. He is there in the country, and always will be" (538). Thus, the explorer figure, merely an instrument of the colonising powers, turns into a hybrid of Indigenous and European cultures. It shows the transformative possibilities of the European from simply an invader who threatens the lives of the Indigenous people into a hybrid. This process of hybridization not only affects the white people, but also the Indigenous people who interact with them. In *Voss*, Jackie, the Aboriginal guide of the expedition, who gradually masters English, interprets the meaning of the burial platforms and the important parts of his Indigenous culture to the European group. He explains the significance of the serpent in his culture to Voss:

"Snake", Jackie explained, "Father, my father, all blackfeller." [. . .] "Kangaroo," said the boy. "Old man," he smiled, touching certain parts. [. . .] "What are they?" These appeared to be an assembly of tortuous skeletons, or bundles of bones and blowing feathers [. . .]. "Men gone away all dead," the boy explained. "All over." He waved his arm. "By rock, by tree. No more men," [. . .]. "Now I understand," said Voss gravely. He did. To his fingertips. He felt immensely happy" (336).

By using the white people's language, Jackie helps them better understand his own culture and becomes a bridge between two cultures, just like a hybrid is expected to do, and as Papastergiadis states in his work, he becomes a "lubricant" between the Europeans, and the Indigenous culture (261). This everlasting effect of the encounter between the Black and White does not momentarily change the Aboriginal boy Jackie, but he gets completely changed as a result of this cultural encounter. After Jackie kills Voss, he immediately runs away from his tribe too. After his escape, he wanders naked and alone in the desert. In his time alone in the desert, he is haunted

by the knowledge he got through this process: "He was slowly becoming possessed of the secrets of the country" (511). What he sees but remains unable to express is the possibility of a shared culture and life in Australia for both the Black and White cultures.

So he did not tell Dugald much beyond some uninteresting facts concerning the mutiny of the white man. All else he kept to himself. For it is not possible to communicate lucidly with men after the communion of souls, and the fur of the white souls had brushed the moist skin of the aboriginal boy as he shuddered in the briga-low scrub (511).

Just as Voss, with his blood spilling into the land, becomes a part of the land and gives a part of himself into the continent, the Aboriginal boy Jackie is forever stained by whiteness. With the cultural exchange he has been through throughout the novel, he too becomes a hybrid, just like Voss, and although Ellen returns to the 'civilized' world at the end of *A Fringe of Leaves*, it is apparent that she will not return to England, but will remain in Sydney, and it is suggested that she will remain there as the wife of Mr. Jevons, as a new kind of European person, whose white culture has been changed a little bit through her encounter with the Black people. Finally, Alf Dubbo, forever stuck in-between the European culture and the Indigenous Australian culture stays as a symbol of a multicultural Australia.

Conclusion

Homi K. Bhabha's theories of hybridity, in-betweenness, and third space are still able to articulate the inevitable consequences of the intercultural relations in colonised societies. Suggesting that literary works subjectively fictionalise the actual or imagined histories and experiences of a given period and place in the world, this study analyses the relationships of Black and White characters, as well as the process that leads to and the consequences of hybridity in colonial Australia through a close reading of *Voss*, *Riders in the Chariot*, and *A Fringe of Leaves* by Patrick White and reinforces the arguments of Bhabha regarding hybridity and its effects in the deconstruction of the binary oppositions that divide Black and White nations. The Indigenous and European characters in the novels, as in the case of Ellen Roxburgh, Johan Ulrich Voss, Dugald, Jackie, Jack Chance, and Alf Dubbo, have a change

of psyche through their experiences with different ontological models and cultures. So, the idea of a fixed identity that has been at the core of colonial discourse that has been perpetuated through the binary oppositions between cultures have been undermined by the white characters who show themselves to be closer to the Indigenous people in many respects, even the agent of colonial powers, a European explorer being turned into a half-Indigene spiritually shows the impossibility of any fixed racial identity.

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