

Recognition of the Self through Mandala: Concentricity in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*

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Abstract

Mandala or concentric imagination is a symbolic, artistic, mystic, and philosophical, concept with wide application in the field of art, culture, and literature. The notion of mandala has ancient roots chiefly in the Vedic culture and Buddhism of India but it has continued to attract a large number of people in different ways all over the world. The study of existing texts from mandalic perspectives show that there are few very prominent practitioners of mandala in literature both in the east and the west. With this understanding, the article seeks to examine mandalic motifs in the Australian author Patrick White's novel *The Solid Mandala* in the light of duality and quaternity. One of the findings is that the employment of concentric imagination helps symbolically and effectively convey the quest for wholeness in modern man. It is interesting to see how the mandala philosophy originating in the East takes its journey to reach beyond the Ocean.

Keywords: Concentricity; Cosmogram; Pythagorean figure; Quaternity; Solid mandala.

Introduction: Mandala in Art and Literature

In Sanskrit language, the word mandala means 'circle' or 'disc' and it is seen as a "mystic circle for meditation" in Buddhism (Simas). In the opinion of Mkhaz Grub Rje, mandala consists of two words 'manda' which means essence, and 'la' referring to seizure. In this way, 'mandala' means "seizing the essence" (270) expressed as a complex cyclic geometric pattern (*Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 2018) to symbolize "the perception of external wholeness which has an integral relationship between the individual consciousness and the unseen inner mind" (MacCurdy 62). The concept of Mandala was recognized by the initial Tantric Hindu cult during the Ve-

dic age in India, and also the Yogic tradition which identifies the mandalic presence in human body necessary for the unification of microcosm with the macrocosm. In Christianity too, it is used in devising the astrological Zodiac and in decorating the frescos of church and other grand monuments. It is said that mandalas were invented to serve Buddhism (Brauen 2009; Hutington and Bangdel 2003; English 2002; Denise and Robert 1997) as Buddha attained enlightenment through meditation and psychic action which were denoted through some pattern similar to the mandala. Thereafter, it travelled far and wide across the globe through his disciples and devotees via the Silk Route and also reached Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Japan, Afghanistan, America, European countries and others places.

While talking about mandala, it becomes pertinent here to mention the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung who derived his mandalic vision in some way from Hinduism and Buddhism to understand the role and function of mandalas and it is interesting to observe that his psychological philosophy mediated well between the East and the West. His autobiographical work "Psychology and Alchemy" (1944), informs about his visit to the monastery of Bhutia Busty, near Darjeeling (India) in 1938. In a conversation with Lamaic Rimpoche Lingdam Gomchen, he came to know about the *khilkor** or mandala. Jung heard him say, "the true mandala is always an inner image, which is gradually built up through (active) imagination, at such times when psychic equilibrium is disturbed or when a thought cannot be found and must be sought for..." (38-39). Again, in "Psychology and Alchemy" and "Psychology and Religion," Jung explains, "circular forms in artistic expression represent an understanding of life as a unified and continual whole" where "squaring of the circle" signifies "the human attempt at structural comprehension within it" (2017).

Mandalas are basically "cosmograms" (Tucci 1961) or "sacred geometry" (Gilchrist 2010) facilitating spiritual liberation (Taylor and Quillian 1976). It is a cosmic source of poetic creation as Charu Sheel Singh explains in *Concentric Imagination: Mandala Literary Theory* (1994). Mandala has been variedly employed by artists and authors to communicate complex ideas. Its motifs symbolically aid the author to delve deep into the psyche of humans who are portrayed in literary texts by them (Cairns 1962; Gudrun 2003). Veteran Indian author and artist Girish Karnad has employed mandala as a key motif in his play *Nagamandala* to show how "a mythic pattern of high artistic and graphic significance" may lead to a unifying effect despite its triple endings (Dolor 2006).

* Khilkor is Tibetan world wheel.

As far as the initial application of mandala in English literature is concerned, we noticed it in the poems of Coleridge, Eliot, and Breytenbach (Deudney 1994). Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" an early example of this kind. Such patterns are also visible in T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets", Wallace Stevens' "The Rock", Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, and Carmel Bird's *The Mandal Trilogy* too. 'Mandala as Literature' is distinctly evident in Borges' "The Aleph" (1945), Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), and Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (2007). A scholar of Mandala in literature Craig Weston Walker defines the moment of mandalic recognition in terms of frenzy, "The individual who achieves it cannot communicate the entirety of the concept. ... The mandala does reduce art into individual moments of significance, but it displays them in terms of the active, collective whole of context" (22-23).

Patrick White and the Recognition of Mandala

Carl Jung's interest in the mystic mandala increased manifolds after meeting the Buddhist monk but the new mansion which he created on that basis by way of his psychological philosophy proved a milestone in letting the idea travel to other parts of the world. The biography of Marr informs that while writing *The Solid Mandala*, the Australian author Patrick White was given a copy of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* in which Jung wrote: "I have...found mandala drawings among the mentally ill... among my patients I have come across cases of women who did not draw mandalas but who danced them instead" (1962, 100). However, few Australian scholars deny accepting that White was influenced by Carl Jung but one thing is certain that both shared the contemporariness and possibly intersected each other on the same philosophical wavelength. The impact of Jungian psychological and archetypal philosophy marks a clear impression on the thematic and stylistic treatments of White in his novels which are built on the pillars of duality, ambiguity, paradoxes, mutuality, suffering, mysticism, and ultimate reconciliation. This establishes White's connection with the Hindu (Buddhist) concept of the mandala in some way or the other. It is known that he had a profound interest in various religions and religious motifs as he says, "In my books I have lifted bits from various religions in trying to come to a better understanding; I've made use of religious themes and symbols" (2011).

Patrick White communicates his religious philosophy through the mandala and employs the concentricity of imagination to represent the ambiguity of existence on the one hand and the spiritual journey within the individual on the other. He largely uses the Buddhist mandala in this novel

and the first experiment with it may be seen in his novel *The Tree of Man*. His vision rests on spirituality and there can be no liberation without religion as he says:

Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books. What I am interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God. I belong to no church, but I have a religious faith... I believe God does intervene; I think there is a Divine Power, a Creator, who has an influence on human beings if they are willing to be open to him. (2011)

Suffering, spirituality, mysticism, and quest for liberation through the realization of a cosmic whole occupy a central place in his novels. His intricately woven plots evident his belief in the mandalic vision which seem to be drawn partly from Carl Jung's doctrine of the mandala and partly from the Australian painter Lawrence Daws,** who was White's contemporary who too created Mandala in 1964 depicting the seven phases of his work engaging with the themes of archetypal symbolism and exotic portent towards the more local and personal. It is remarkable to notice that most of the novels of White particularly *The Tree of Man* (1955), *Voss* (1957), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *The Vivisector* (1970), and *The Twyborn Affair* (1979) are in some way or the other illustrations of his mandalic vision. White's own experiences of seclusion, solitude, and homosexuality impart in him a vision that may help to reconcile and attain wholeness.

The novels of Patrick White may be well characterized as difficult texts with difficult characters. His narratives, says White, are 'dredged up from the unconscious which makes it an inexhausting destructive process'. In an interview published in *Southerly*, he tells, 'All my characters are fragments of my own somewhat fragmented character' (Heltay, 1973). Therefore, doubling and fragmentation characterize his *The Living and the Dead* (1941) too where he writes, "Alone, he was not alone, uniting as he did the themes of so many lives" (18). In the literary context, we may understand that the author of mandala creates literary works in a pattern that may be recognized by the reader; thus, both share the collective unconscious. The prime objective of mandala is to reconcile opposites to convey an illuminating moment of understanding. Though this epiphany is usually not attained by humans, mandalas often represent a longing to experience it. Patrick White is a phenomenal writer of modern Australia who trans-

** Lawrence Daws was born in 1927. He was an Australian painter and printer who earned significant position through his art particularly his oil paint 'Mandala' in 1964 in which he depicted seven stages of his life and growth.

formed its vastness of empty land into grand mythic landscapes of the soul and celebrates the 'lights and silences' (*The Solid Mandala*, 265).

Mandalic doctrine in *The Solid Mandala*

All the major novels of White contain mandalic vision in some way or other but it is most explicit in the novel *The Solid Mandala* (1966) which is about the Brown family and the realization of deeper significance of life by its members. The book is organized in four parts wherein the central part offers an account of the lives of the Brown twins Waldo and Arthur. Out of the two, Arthur is shambling, simple-minded; whereas Waldo is intellectual, brittle, and 'gifted'. The twins serve as tools to comprehend the continuous movement between idea and matter in the novel, which in turn, also helps in conducting an intricate and intimate study of the soul and body and the relation between the two.

White's use of the mandala motif to portray the characters of Arthur and Waldo in the novel aligns well with the notions of femininity and masculinity, gender identity and performativity given by Judith Butler who writes, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 33). Both the brothers Arthur and Waldo are skeptical about their identity and share womanish traits instead of masculine ones. Waldo Brown seems to suffer from transvestic disorder, prefers having women's attire, and lacks sexual attraction towards Dulcie Feinstein. The same is the case with Arthur Brown, whose personality looks strange and eccentric due to his abnormal behaviour. This apparent bizarre behaviour of the two conceals their primordial maternal connections and thus inspires us to see them in a Jungian context as well. The novel figures as a powerful critique of dominant nineteenth-century Western notions of sexual identity that fostered heteronormative sexuality and thereby opens new vistas to reflect on the questions of 'being' in the postmodern world.

The denizens in the world portrayed in *The Solid Mandala* constitute a web of interactions broadly divided into inner circle and outer circle at the deeper level of consciousness. Emphasizing this idea that the world exists in two halves and continuously seeks unity, through these characters, White explores the tension between the material and the spiritual dimensions of human existence with the help of mandala. Despite the psychosexual similarity between the twin brothers, there are a few subtle differences between them that make each one essential for the other to

complete. Their divergent routes in life foreground their existential challenges in the quest for meaning in life. Arthur's pursuit of worldly success and Waldo's for spiritual one helps the author further highlight the tangible realities of life and contrast the material world with the spiritual. The very trait of the mandala and its pattern remarkably supports the plot of *The Solid Mandala* in underlining the complexities of the human experience and the search for transcendence and self-discovery.

The true doctrine of mandala works in the novel through Arthur Brown who strives to find meaning in the larger cosmic design of life against the enervating rationalism of the Brown family. The quasi-mystical axis of the plot culminates in an epiphanic realization in the twins. The human sense of isolation and material emptiness, the inevitability of religious and spiritual force in life; and the human failure and resultant agony, all correspond to the four epigraphs written by White in the novel exploring the possibility of mandalic totality. The four epigraphs signify the four cornered mandala corresponding to the very mandalic structure made up of doubles, squares, triangles, and cycles. The *four* is a mandalic number and the four epigraphs drawn from the works of Paul Eluard ("There is another world, but it is in this one") Meister Eckhart ("It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within"), Patrick Anderson ("...yet still I long for my twin in the sun...") and Dostoevsky ("It was an old and rather poor church, many of the ikons were without settings, but such churches are the best for praying in."), remarkably suggest the intertextual references in the novel.

Doubling, Fragmentation, Quaternity and Concentricity in 'The Solid Mandala'

On being deeply observed, the twins are a perfect example of doubling as they are the two sides of a whole person. This dualism is manifested by them through dramatized disturbance within the man which makes it a tragedy of human incompleteness. In other words, the twins enact an impure mixture of love and hate which signifies the usual relationship among human beings. The growth and evolution of Arthur and Waldo (the twins) from their childhood to middle age and eventual retirement have been portrayed in the novel, for which, White employs the technique of moving forward and backward. This technique facilitates our ability to decipher the complex labyrinth of the human psyche.

In *The Solid Mandala*, White has offered the abstract pattern, a double narrative of the same event through the twins Arthur and Waldo who represent the two aspects of same identity. There is a continuous flow between

ideas and tangible realities through a complex narrative that knits the soul with the body. Waldo, the younger twin, loved precision in the manner and served the library of New South Wales throughout his life. Arthur, who is seeming 'dim-wit', spends his life serving as a grocer's assistant. He is quite intuitive and painfully articulates his vision. During his childhood, he was captivated by glass marbles because of their wholeness. This fascination was strengthened further when later in his life he comes across "mandala as a symbol of totality" (*The Solid Mandala*, 238) in an encyclopedia, though its meaning was still incomprehensible to him. Arthur's quest for wholeness finds some consolation when his father explains to him: "Totality is the quality of being total... that which is a whole" (*The Solid Mandala*, 240). He begins to read Dostoevsky's philosophical fiction *The Brothers Karamazov*, a theological drama of moral struggle concerning faith, doubt, reason, and judgment, set against a modernizing Russia, to give it a psychological reality. Arthur envisages that people cannot appreciate him but "it was himself only who would remain, the keeper of mandalas, and must guess their final secret through touch and light" (*The Solid Mandala*, 240). The struggle to comprehend the meaning of mandala in life is symbolized here by the red gold disc of the Sun which he wanted to hold by the icebergs. It is worth mentioning that White preferred to set his novels in urban settings rather than the countryside. It may be understood also that he perceives that the moral struggle is more in the modern man dwelling in cities. Waldo, on the other hand, is seemingly the most rational member in the Brown family due to his "tight world...of punctuality and unbreakable rules" (*The Solid Mandala*, 229). Disappointed in love and authorship, he is quite disdainful of his enigmatic brother Arthur.

The novel sweeps forward and backward involving several movements or concentric circles. The mandalic concentricity could be understood through the following diagram:

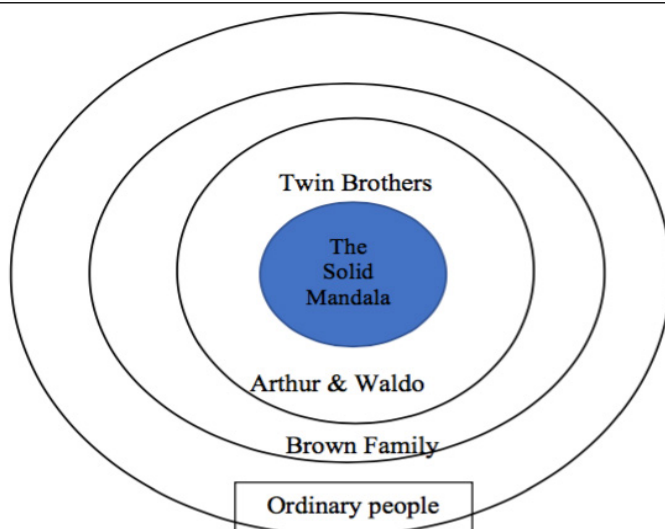


Fig. 1. Concentric Structure of the plot of *The Solid Mandala* (Copyright: Arti Nirmal)

Arthur Brown, the chief character in the novel, is a Pythagorean figure and also a typical anima image of his brother Waldo. His curiosity about the hermaphroditic nature of remains till the end. His quest for the meaning of totality helps him understand at a very early stage that it was he who was and will remain, the keeper of the mandalas. Consequent upon this realization, his actions are motivated by the philosophic dictum: "I generate light, and darkness is not of my nature; there is, therefore, nothing better or more vulnerable than the conjunction of myself with my brother" (*The Solid Mandala*, 229). But unfortunately, despite all efforts, he fails to be himself a mandala, a reconciling symbol. He doesn't understand that "true" twins are two halves of a single soul and that Waldo was an essential acceptable portion of the totality. Arthur fails to offer all his love, the pain of which gets expressed in the form of his four-cornered mandala dance. This four-cornered mandala dance is nothing but a symbolic representation of the "four constituents of the round world" (Jung *Psychology*, 66). Though he is conscious of the presence of the conciliatory mandalic motifs and symbols in their vivid forms, yet he fails to recognize the meaning of mandalas present around him, for instance, the rock crystal where "God can be found" (*The Solid Mandala*, 80), Mr. Saporita's Turkish rug that "has the mandala in the center" (*The Solid Mandala*,

250), in Dulcie's star of David that he comes to see is "another mandala" (*The Solid Mandala*, 245), or in the patterning of his own peculiar four-cornered mandalic dance for Mrs. Poulter. Arthur's limitations are perhaps described best in his meeting with the speechless and almost dying Mr. Feinstein: "Then Arthur knew he could never explain what was too big, an enormous marble, filling, rolling round intolerably inside his speechless mouth" (*The Solid Mandala*, 278).

Thus, the mandala is "a pattern of order super-imposed on psychic-chaos" (*The Solid Mandala* 238), for Arthur Brown; for Jung, it is a reconciling symbol; and according to White, it is a worldview, a way of observing the characters and their interrelationships so that "characters and situations always stand for more than themselves; infinity attends them, though they remain, individuals, they expand to embrace it and summon it to embrace them" (Forster 1958, 123).

Dancing the Mandala: the recognition of Self

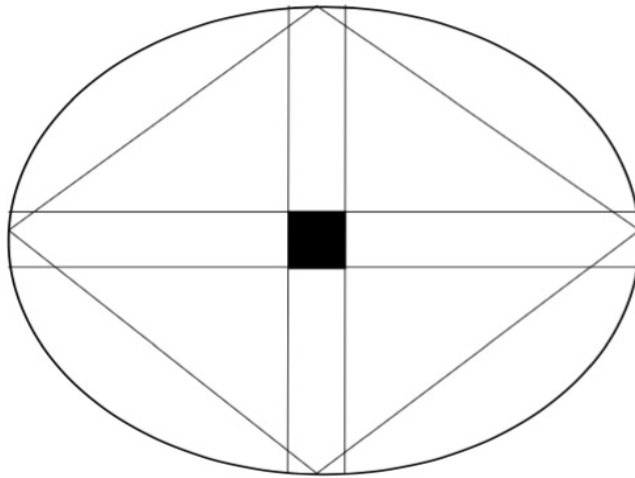


Fig. 2. Arthur's Four Cornered Mandala Dance (Copyright: Arti Nirmal)

Dance is a complex motif in the plots of Patrick White. He uses a network of symbols and motifs in the form of a Lotus, Wheels, etc. to symbolize the mandala which culminates at last in the form of dance. In *The Solid Mandala* too, Arthur performs a four-cornered dance for Waldo. Through

symbolic gesture and movement, the dance portrays the sufferings, intrinsic qualities, and hollowness of the characters. The dance is performed for his intellectual but emotionally dry brother Waldo. White evokes dance through words more than movement. He writes: "So Arthur Brown danced, beginning at the first corner, from which he would proceed by stages to the fourth, and beyond. He who was so large, so shambly, found movement coming to him on the hillside in the bay of blackberries" (*The Solid Mandala*, 265). White himself loved dancing and viewed it as a way to release. Ann McCulloch too perceives Arthur's dance as an attempt to integrate the different aspects of his life, it helps him to attain a pattern. White in *Three Uneasy Pieces* (1987) thoughtfully reflects on his use of dance as a complex motif in these words: "Those who dance will always dance, will share the privileges of air, fire, water, figures of the tireless dance disguised, ashes strewn on the stagnant surface of the lake a variation on the same theme" (2011, 16).

Arthur's dance is a deliberate action as he pronounces before performing that he was going to "dance a mandala". The dance of Arthur is performed in the manner of a hysterical 'fit', particularly, at the end. The mingling of "dark music" and "white notes" is also noteworthy. Besides Arthur, the other people who dance include his mother and people with "drunken faces", dancing lunatically at the end of World War II. Unlike Arthur, his father and Waldo, are found rational and intellectuals, and therefore, they keep reading the book, and do not dance. Dance is one prominent motif in many of the Australian novels employing which the authors have tried to dismantle the colonial constructs. Arthur's hysterical dance too may be seen as an interrogation of the hegemonic normative dance performances. The apparent abnormality in the four-cornered dance corresponding to the four marbles on four quarters could be seen as an attack on the hollowness of the so-called intellectuals (chiefly those who read and do not dance). It may also be seen as a critique of stereotypical Anglophone culture which believed dance to be a feminine activity not meant for heterosexual men. Interestingly, Arthur problematizes these stereotypes and challenges them because Arthur (who looks dim-wit and brittle) performs several masculine tasks in his work. For example, he works initially as a grocer and then in a garage; falls in love with two women, Dulcie and Mrs. Poulter, who become the custodians of his mandala marbles (Jewell, 2005).

The dance by Arthur, in *The Solid Mandala*, reveals that it is not he who is the homosexual but the non dancing "intellectual" Waldo, whose homosexuality gets revealed when he admits his love for a male friend Wal-

ter Pugh. In an extremely candid moment, he confesses that after putting on his mother's dress, he felt "[s]he could afford to breathe indulgently, magnificent down to the last hair in her moustache" (*The Solid Mandala* 193). Further, the dance also enables Arthur to get rid of his dullness and emerge to be a visionary figure. It is through him, that we enter deep into the cycles of the mandala: the solid mandala, the core, the essence of the cosmos.

Patrick White innovatively establishes an unconventional relationship between dance and mandala. In India, however, "one may come across a dance form called *mandala nrithya* or mandala dance, and in its performance, the dance figures express the same meanings as the drawings" (Jung as qt in Richard 100). Just like the patients of Jung, Arthur preferred to dance instead of drawing his mandala dreams. White's dancer in the novel dances alone at all four corners. "Stamp", "trampled", "arms... laid along his sides" and "stillest" are the only terms used to describe his minimal dance movements. The geometric design of Arthur's dance according to Ratnakar Sadawarte resembles "Nyasa", a complex method of *Tantra Sadhana* in which the idea of duality occupies central locale. Hence, Arthur's dance remains obscure containing deep symbolic and intended meanings. In brief, the novel is about the continuous struggle of humans between duality and unity. One can also mark deviation in the writings of White from the earlier "realist" traditions of existing Australian writers. He embraced a modernist view of his time and adopted a complex pattern of the mandala to detail the complexities inherent in modern man's life.

Conclusion

The novel *The Solid Mandala* is remarkable attempt of Patrick White in deconstructing the social definition of masculinity and sexuality; the perception of dance as essentially feminine; the paramount status of human intellect and rationality; and above all, the human ability to achieve wholeness. There may be debate over the point as to what inspired White to develop his vision of the mandala but one can notice a strong analogy between the Indic concept of the mandala archetype and White's use of mandala in his novels. It might be coincidental too as all of us belong to the same world and share a common genome too to some extent. But, an engaged reading of the novels of the grand old man of Australia Patrick White, particularly *The Solid Mandala*, reinforces this assumption to a great extent that at some point some exchange between Asian Subcontinent and Oceania certainly took place. It conveys the ultimate notion that there is "no blasphemy at the centre of the mandala" (*The Solid Mandala*, 293) and

it is only through the mandala one can “re-enter the actual sphere of life” (*The Solid Mandala*, 316).

Patrick White perceived modern human life as essentially complex and chaotic; dichotomic and schizophrenic. He lived a thoroughly urban life all through his life and minutely observed that man had a continuous longing for completeness, unity, and meaning, and therefore, he irresistibly depicts an alternating pattern of order and chaos in his novels; a continuous movement of human Self along the circle guiding towards things which are interior and inside. Therefore, he sets his fiction in the suburbs of Australia or the countryside; creates apparently incomplete human beings who may resist the normative norms of the so called ‘rational’ human society; digresses from the established trend of realism and embraces modernism; and above all employ mandalic motifs, patterns, and images to symbolically suggest the true human condition and human struggle in the present time. White’s preoccupation with the mandala is all pervasive in his fiction and he suggests mandala in one way or the other in most of his novels namely *Voss*, *The Tree of Man*, *Riders to the Chariot*, *The Twyborn Affair*, and a few others but in *The Solid Mandala* it becomes more explicit and attains culmination.

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