



# The Voice of Ambiguity in Thomas Pynchon's *V*

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**Abstract** - Thomas Pynchon's perception of culture and society along with their inherent problems, and the possibility of the eradication of those problems, in general, has aided in the development of his view of the world which seems very much guided by the contemporary science, in special. The application of the scientific concept on human reality and their finding their relevance is Pynchon's greatest endeavour. Other than entropy and thermodynamics, Pynchon also uses the concept of 'force' in the delineation of human behaviour in mass but not in an individual, which Pynchon believes is unpredictable. Pynchon had indeed succeeded in interpreting a reality of nature or world in *V*. The contemporary science and technology has led him to form a view and understanding of the working – patterns of the realities. These working patterns, he found, fit in every system of knowledge. Thus it helped him in looking at the problems of the world and at its redeeming possibilities while at the same time forming a world-view, at large, through these scientific concepts. Both Scientist and author have their own view point regarding the forces of law. This radical transformation in the understanding of the laws laid a greater impact in the understanding of human reality and existential reality on Pynchon's mind.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Postmodern Condition, Cultural Labyrinths, Uncertainty

Pynchon is perhaps the most enigmatic of the American writers who has achieved considerable amount of fame and name. He belongs to the class of writers in whom there is persistent strain of suspicion towards biography and hostility towards publicity. He was associated with no rumours, no interviews, no public appearances and no pictures, even when he was chosen for the Pulitzer and the Faulkner Award he declined it. There is a constant mixing of disciplines like arts, science and music in his works. This tendency helped Pynchon to be one with peers like Bellow, Barth, Bartheleme to name a few, in reformulating a new directionality and breaking away from the traditional writers. In keeping with the ethos of the modern times, Pynchon advocates for a fractured, fragmented and discontinuous order as being contrary to the consistent and coherent old.

The fiction of sixties makes an attack on the historical and the real. But gradually experimentation became the cult thus lashing at direct historical reference. So, rejecting the pre-formed ideas of reality it tried to create its own provisional and free world of creative consciousness. A loss of signification and coherent meaning reigned high. A wave towards experimentalism was soaring. The art and literature of the decade of sixties was mainly influenced by an unmanageable stylistic glut, formal multiplicity and interfusion. The correlation between sign and signification became arbitrary on the one hand and on the other the style almost became styleless by acquiring multiple but fascinating forms like an imaginary museum or a kaleidoscope, thus, resulted in a parody. T.Rajeshwar in *Modernism and Post Modernism in English Literature* says that: "There are poems, novels, and plays in modern world literature, describing human life as an absurd, ridiculous, and superfluous phenomenon. In our day a number of people consider these works demoralizing, destructive, and refuse to accept this kind of approach" (224) All these characteristics hinted towards a new tendency, postmodernism, which is called the storehouse of styles. A further move towards experimental and avant-gardism of modernism was suggested as the basic trend in postmodernism but at the same time it disregarded its high seriousness and hope for any formal totality and transcendence.

Thomas Pynchon is one writer who remarkably represents this 'break away' trend of the modern discontinuity in his works. His area of grotesque begins in the historical world, well depicting the psychic imbalances and cultural disruption of Nazi and wartime America and Europe. The characters of Pynchon are made such, who can't skillfully

handle the inchoate and variegated world in which they find themselves agaped and driven along. So, the determining factor in Pynchon's writings is the text which runs by an extensive and often expository discursiveness. It functions on the interface between two levels of experience one, the experience of hyperactivity and excess and the other one of hermetic containment. These essential postmodernist experiences and mannerisms have provided a direction to Pynchon's work.

The graphic plot in his first novel *V.* is on discontinuity. There are two complete stories which run parallel and overlap through the enigmatic initial which is the title of the book *V.* Thus *V.* is a mysterious and dangerous woman whose numerous identities and loyalties are of shifting type. The two plots of the novel are brought close to each other in search of *V.* via the investigation of her plot. Pynchon also successfully attempts to concede with this plot, the unraveling of the bogus plot of which the characters are the victims. The second novel, *The crying of Lot 49*, seems astonishing as being very short and classical in its pace and economy. It is a very elegantly crafted novel and doesn't show an exercise in the narrative form. Pynchon's interest in absurd and black humour comes in the foreground in this novel also. The two aspects of personality, head and heart get amalgamated in the central figure, the chief investigatrix, Oedipa Mass. She is given a work to solve the puzzle of Pierce Inverarity's enmeshment which challenges her own sanity. The novel has tried to rediscover the Oedipus myth as the tragi-comedy of rationalism, which tries to categorize and understand the deep-rooted complexities of its own life. The figure of Oedipus includes binaries in itself: masculine and feminine, passionate and intellectual, quester and the object, victim of the quest and its victimizer. The choice of language had always been a problem for an artist and Pynchon derives his language from the theory of information technology in this

novel. In the science of information theory, the information transmitted by a signal depends upon the inverse ratio of noise, redundancy and non-information. The type and quality of any information transmitted by the element is in accordance to the negative logarithm of its predictability in transmission. In other words, a medium can become full of information with separate facts derived from them. Though there is disparity at the surface but it doesn't hide the coherence which is at the deeper level. The next novel *Gravity's Rainbow* is about the nightmare dreamt by a British Intelligence Officer during the World War II of V-2 bombardments which would affect his mental powers. Whole of the novel is either dream-like or nightmarish. This logic of dream has an impact of existentialism. Pynchon feels the need of using language as significant signs and must enter a post-humanist space. He also tries to grapple with the problem of communication and the structurelessness created by its own self. But the method that he has adopted is one to evolve a continuous hypothesis through the layers of discontinuities.

The whole environment and situation is replete with death, decay and decline whether be it the real desert or modern society both are shown as garbage heap. Every situation disintegrates into chaos or decay. A drift towards the mechanical and inanimate is over-emphasized. The old Renaissance system, civilization and buildings are disintegrating with the hints of extinction and dehumanization thus quickening the entropic processes of human kind. Benny Profane in his imagination converses with a machine called SHROUD (Synthetic Human Radiation Output Determined) which echoes a worrying parody of human existence where the man is heading towards in this age. Benny, a layman is unable to conceive or understand the direction of his walk. That Man is moving towards future with too much dependence on the inanimate machines. Pynchon has tried to bring out a

starting point of human extinction from the old imperialist events linked in extenuation to the process with Hitler, contemporary automotation, tourism and the Whole Sick Crew – this might be the crux of the novel.

It is a general agreement that historical chapters are weightier than contemporary one, but it does give a valuable contribution in shaping up the theme of the novel. Benny Profane appears suddenly in the first chapter of the book without any introduction or history suggesting that his existence matter only for the present. He keeps shifting from one job to another and his life is full of violent parties, this clearly indicates that he is not a conventional character but a 'free wheeling character' where the character experiments and produces a contrast of unsettled provisional life to the domestic sobriety of Victorian or Renaissance age. In the first chapter, during the drinking session he says in second person: "Try to squeeze a water melon into a small tumbler sometime when your reflexes are not so good. It is next to impossible" (18). The emotional life given to Profane is uncontrolled and aimless, suggested by his sympathy for derelicts and bums, nostalgia for Depression and his involvement in other's tensions. In this way Profane is attributed no specific clear role, but of a derelict where chance fights and escapades are constant throughout the book.

Thus, an uncertainty surrounds Profane. A truncated character is suggested by the label of 'schemihl' and 'yo-yo' given to him in the title of the first chapter by Pynchon. In this way by accepting this label he himself reduces his existence at the same time to an amoeba – like passivity.

The second label 'yo – yo' suggests the endless aimlessness of everything in life and calls for a look into the movement of his life which is one of Profane's determinants, wherever he goes he just 'happens' to pass whether through Norfolk or Virginia, New York, shuttle or later in Staten Island Ferry.

Profane is one of those absurd figures who happen to be same throughout and at the mercy of chance without any persistent change, that his clothes are also same in the end as at his first entry in the narrative. So the movement of his 'yo-yo' like life is to kill the monotony of life. In this way Profane is just an attenuated and lethargic version of 'Beat mobility' who disappears into the deluge of darkness at the novel's end.

It is through Profane that we come across a group of New Yorkers collectively called Whole Sick Crew. The members of this Whole Sick Crew participate in a common lethargy. They are a product of their machine – driven environment. Through them Pynchon elucidates that the Edenic Garden has transformed into Machine. The two computers SHROUD and SHOCK (Synthetic Human Object Causality Kinematics) reflects the barren future for man and an extension of mankind. This degeneracy of mankind into machine is most visible in Whole Sick Crew. They are the impersonations of poverty and rebellion of artistic souls, "most of them worked for a living and obtained the substance of their conversation from the pages of Time Magazine" (56-57), and their avant-gardism is dismissed. Their motionlessness is projected by a range of static images and when they move their movement is restricted to monotonous and repetitive ones, from one party to another. The emotion of love for whole Sick Crew is restricted only to mechanical activity. The whole of the group comes out as a self – deceived lot excessively involved in the consumer network.

In the second main plot which sets up the historical chapters of the novel is the research work of Herbert Stencil to trace out a mysterious and dangerous woman V. Though the historical chapters are quite self – contained but still some seems overlapping into the modern chapters. Pynchon has designed Stencil's search for information with Whole

Sick Crew at its periphery and his route is intersected by Profane that urgently reminds the intersecting paths of Stephen and Bloom in Ulysses. Stencil can be viewed as a “century’s child and he is fulfilling that role by representing modern man in quest for reality. Prior to War he was a derelict like Profane and got into some unmeaningful action by the journals of his father so, he becomes a representative of those American heroes who are adrift in lethargic aimlessness. Through the references of V. in his father’s journals he finds a reason for motion. Otherwise he was a victim of sleep and inertia. So, he shapes out his quest for V. through some deft clues but its success is terrifying also as it will again push him back to inertia and sleep. Again everything and every situation would disintegrate into entropic processes. So, to keep ‘active a borderline metabolism’ Stencil adopts a strategy of ‘Approach and Avoid’. This strategy can give some aid in maintaining consciousness and meaningful action but it does project the inherent solipsism implicit in them. All his techniques of self – extension and self – duplication are a means of furthering his quest and distancing any direct contact with reality. The faint clues of V. which he has transformed into fantasy becomes his obsession.

Stencil is locked in the hothouse of history and Profane wandering in the streets of modern world, which is his natural domain. Profane has come from nowhere and in the end disappears into the darkness of nowhere. The street is an area of waking with absolute present and meaninglessness, unaware and indifferent to patterns and clues which Stencil is observed with. He confesses that he has learnt nothing from his roaming up and down the streets of world other than to be frightened of them. Stencil fits into this zone of hothouse which is a region of memory, when mind is sealed up with past memories. And under the street is an area of dream to seek some temporary peace and oblivion. This is the domain where artists

descend to flourish their imagination. The three domains are the three levels of consciousness which hints at human need to make fantasies.

The main action of the novel is to unravel the mysteries surrounded around V. She is shown as a woman wrapped in a number of disguises as for example Victoria Wren, Hedwig Vogelsang, Veronica Manganese, a mysterious lady in Paris, a Bad Priest in Malta, a number of other references suggested by letter V. A number of such references puzzles Stencil as well as the reader to reach the correct V. The true identity of V. remains indispensable even at the end. V. is considered as a warehouse of knowledge. When the readers expectations get undermined and a number of possibilities are placed before him then he attempts to search a meaning himself and cannot get outside the novel. It is for reader’s involvement technique that Pynchon uses ellipses, jumps over space and time, shifting from lyrical reverie to a nightmare, multiple interpretations, disorientation of systems and patterns or denying any kind of finality.

The denial of any finality is evident in Calvinism also which believes in sticking to binaries and negates any possibility for middle ground. So, whichever Pynchon’s character tries to leave the fixed polarity of his identity and encompasses this middle ground he gets victimized by a controlling system which again aims to give him a fixed identity. Bowing down to this control means accepting a mechanical life which is most akin to an inanimate and escape seems an impossibility. The only way to escape is through humanistic responses to life confinements. In *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the characters could renew their vitality only by descending into the underworld of their vitality only by descending into the underworld of their gutters and by drawing those energizing faculties of culture which had been dumped as waste by the power mongers, which hindered their effort of control. In this way, Pynchon undermines the empirical

determinacy of Western worldview by satirizing such characters, disrupting the traditional narrative pattern and favouring the anarchic humanism by highlighting the threats of overdependence on rationalism. Thus, Pynchon demands from the new age to shed the reliance on old established names and invent their own act of naming and terminology. Like the way he himself used word Luddite for counter – revolutionaries who denies rational arrangement of mechanics in the world. The Luddites according to Pynchon was a group in Britain between 1811 – 1816 who objected the use of machinery that replaced them in the textile industry. They broke their loyalties with British king and joined the mythical king Ludd who in 1779 in a fit of insanity destroyed two knitting hosiery machines in a house. Thus, the anti – mechanizationists started calling themselves Luddites.

Moreover, to bring a change in the new point of view in the society, Pynchon tries to convert his readers through his Luddite – plots, such plots deny any reliability on rationality. He tries to free the Western Psyche from any sort of colonialism. So, Pynchon becomes a moralist as well, along with being a fabulist, detective, black humourist and so on. He appears a self – effacing saviour of the doom by recording the conscience-death of our culture and makes vocal the salvational alternatives and possibilities. Indeed, Pynchon's work has registered and catalogued every aspect of modern man's history in a fragmented and chaotic manner. The obscurant aspect is leant to his work by the full range of allusions used. But his allusions whether scientific or artistic have a pattern which provides his work a unity. These patterns exhibit an antinomy between entropic, void ward drift visible in the materialistic view of things and the possibilities for transcendence suggested in the spiritual view.

In *V.*, Pynchon has made use of Botticelli's painting *The Birth of Venus* as an allusion. The painting is of lovely goddess

Venus who is portrayed in all her perfection, beauty and innocence. There are two plots in the novel that run parallel to each other, one is set in the present, i.e., fifties of the nineteenth century and the other at the turn of the century leading up to the present. The protagonist of the first plot is Benny Profane and of the other one is Stencil. Stencil takes up a great task of resolving the mystery of a woman, V., who happens to be his mother but she is also projected as the archetypal Terrible Mother by the mytho-graphers. At the outset she is shown as an ingenuous young English lady, Victoria Wren and is thus alluded to Botticelli's painting *Birth of Venus* but gradually, there is transformation of Victoria Wren into V, in Florence which gives occasion to make the painting an ironic emblem of V's decadent character graph. In Pynchon's imaginary Florence of 1899, a freelance political operative, Raphael Mantissa, appreciates and tries to seek in the painting something that's lacking in his life, i.e., transcendence and perfection. According to the author he belongs to 'a circle...whose outer rim was tangent to rims enclosing the – Decadents of England and France, the Generation of '98 in Spain, for whom the continent of Europe was like a gallery one is familiar with but long weary of' (160) Pynchon tries to build a connection between the rise of fascism and the downfall of aestheticism.

In the beginning, Pynchon presents Victoria Wren as an idealized incarnation of Goddess Venus, but gradually her image gets distorted which complacents to the 20<sup>th</sup> century environment and thus out of the beautiful and strangely religious Victoria Wren emerges a creature of horror and darkness. Through her, Pynchon gives a peep inside the decadent Western culture and provides a contrast for pupal stage of being which will eventually embody that culture's decadence. Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* stands in sharp contrast to the birth of V-ness. Where the pure and perfect

beauty of Venus is born in daylight out of the breezy Aegean Sea, the creature of horror and darkness is born at night in the midst of chaos and confusion. So, the birth of V. celebrates the decline of all the cultural sanctities of the civilization. In this way, the painting takes a new connotation and stands for all that is inclusive in V by the new dispensation. Its subject, Venus, is no more a pious beauty but gets transformed into a beauty of terror and darkness, so the subject is displaced. The action of the birth of goddess is travestied. It has lost its position as an aesthetic epitome and fails to soothe the melancholic anarchist's soul. V is seen as Vheissu, a viod, a falasity; so, the painting suffers multiple degradation.

Pynchon's text are regarded as allegories, for his narratives try to seek values and interest affected by the discourses of truth. Pynchon directs his narration in the pursuit of truth and narrative tries to seek enlightenment and brings consciousness of the manners in which views of culture are used to sustain cultural power at the expense of individual freedom. And, generally, allegory interprets that human activity which works between the culture and the individual consciousness. And through this individual allegorical text it is possible to show a self – conscious document of the manner in which cultural discourses find social validation and also how they authorize certain configurations of cultural power.

Both narrative and absolute truth are conflated in the similar quasi transcendental source of legitimation which is invoked for both culture and society. So, allegory engages itself in not just the political, social and economic realities of culture but also in the justification of explanations of those realities provided by culture.

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