

Re-reading 'Mandala' Motif: Identity formation in White's *The Solid Mandala*

Sarbojit Biswas

I

The origins of the Sanskrit word 'mandala' meaning 'disc, circle,' can be traced to Rig Veda where it stands for the title of sections of the book, and Hindu and Buddhist art and religious practices, where it refers to a formation where a square is enclosed in a circle. The mandala has manifold representations and meanings – it can stand for a circle, a polygon, a community, a connection, a support for a meditating or tantric person, a palace with four gates facing four corners of the Earth, a sacred space and even a geometric pattern for microcosm of the universe in the human mind. (Hansen) With respect to Oriental Art, it is defined as “a schematized presentation of the cosmos, chiefly characterized by a concentric configuration of geometric shapes, each of which contains an image of a deity or an attribute of a deity” and “any of various designs symbolizing the universe, usually circular” with reference to Hindu and Buddhist Art. (Mandala) Similarly according to Lessing and Wayman in their edition of Mkhas Grub Rje's Fundamentals of the Buddhist Tantras, the mandala word can be divided into two parts. Thus “manda” would mean “essence” or “pith” and “la” would mean a “seizing” with the implication that it conveys an idea of “seizing the essence” or “enclosing the essence.” (Rje)

A study of various mandala formations in various locations between India and China would reveal the application of the design to architecture, rituals, beliefs and faiths. Thus for example, if we look at the *Buddha Vajrasattva Mandala* design, symbolizing original crystalline purity, we can visualize the sacred centre which is a lotus blossom of eight petals resting on a bed of gold and surrounded with a square palace with gates pointing to the four corners of the Earth. And on the outside, are four outer circles, the fire of wisdom, the vajra circle, the tombs circle and lotus

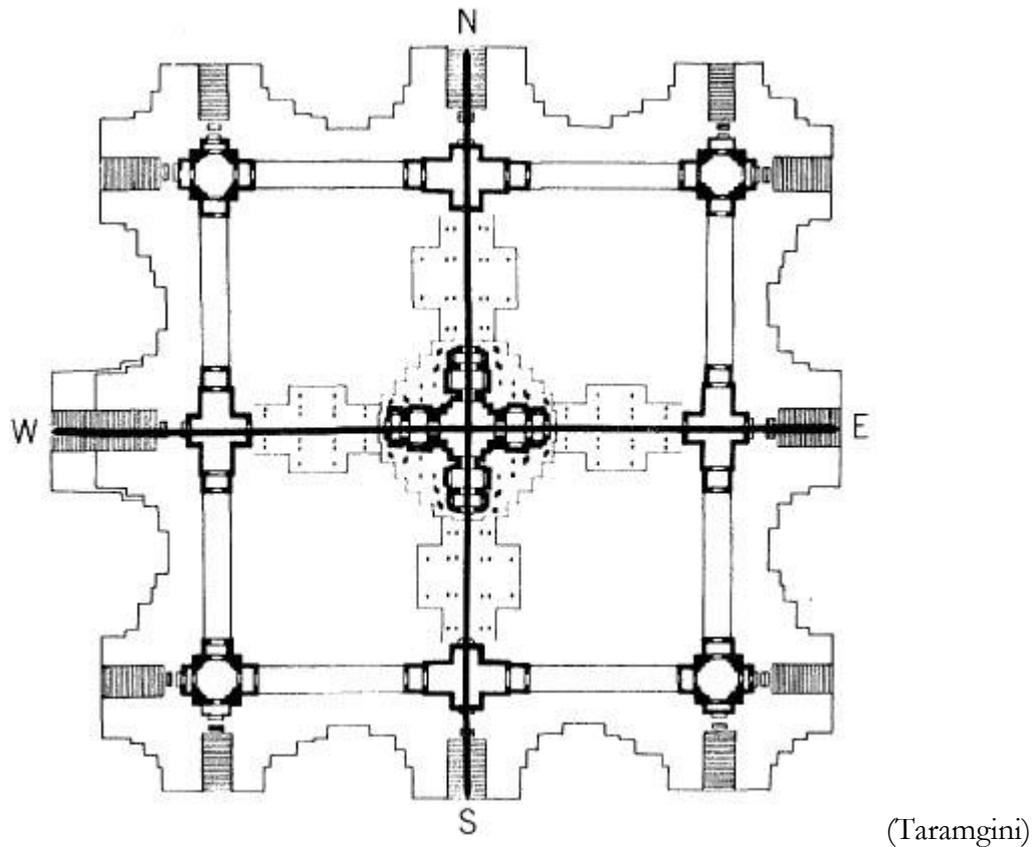
circle in the inside which the meditating human being must pass through to arrive at the gates. The sacred centre is inhabited by the symbol of Buddha whose enlightenment is the ultimate goal.



(Hansen)

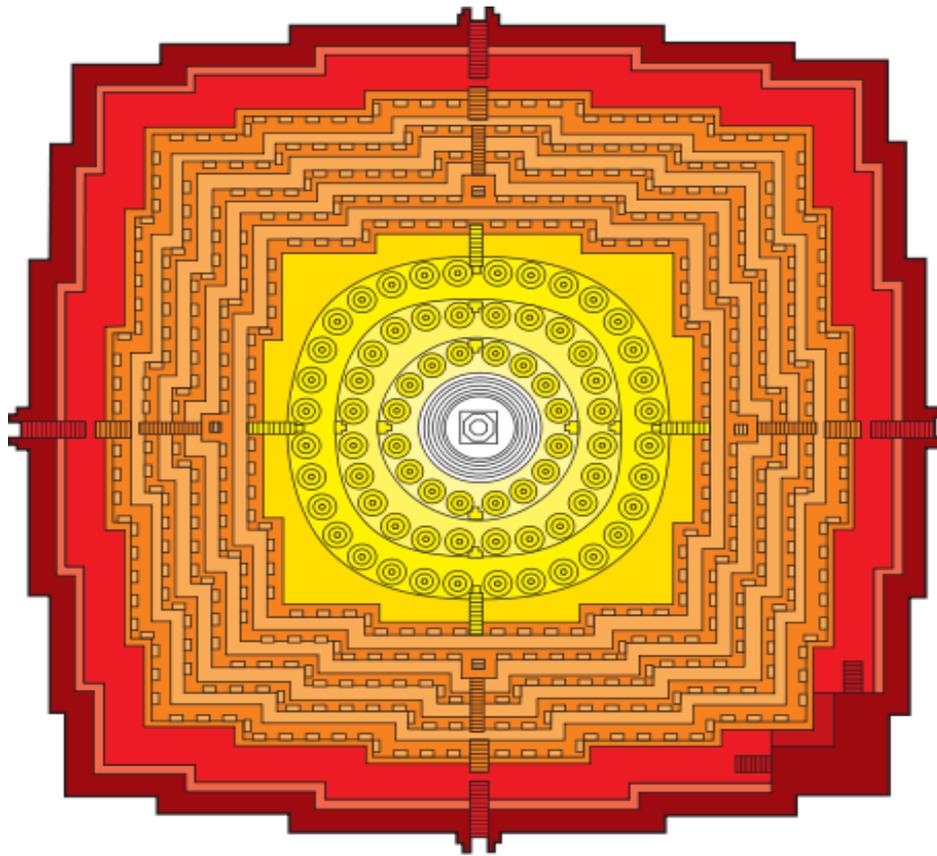
Picture 1: *Buddha Vajrasattva Mandala*

A look at the archaeological wonders in Cambodia would reveal that the ancient Khmers used an architectural style where there was a pyramid of steps crowned by five towers. Thus Angkor Vat, the most famous of the temples present there is designed in the shape of a mandala and reveals a geometric pattern of a perfect world with square nested walls and passages leading past deity images to a central tower as Picture 2 reveals. Thus the Kalatman Mandala at Angkor Vat refers to a rare ‘tantric prayoga’ or usage related to a ‘yaga’ (fire rite) known as the ‘Parameshwara Agama’ and its mantras and rituals are related to the basic plan, as revealed in the diagram, of a dodecagonal plan with 12 spokes leading to the outer rim with petals or circles and surrounded by a decagonal rim. Thus this Kalatman mandala envisages Lord Shiva encompassing time and space and is a continuity of Vedic traditions.



Picture 2: Kalatman Mandala at Angkor Vat

Then again, the Temple at Borobudur, a domain of the Vajradhara sect, a form of Tantricism, is a huge three dimensional mandala with six squared stories, each higher but smaller than the previous one enclosing a three concentric inner circular terraces and a central stupa in the middle. Thus the ground plan, as Picture 3 reveals, references both Buddhist cosmology and the nature of the human mind, with the three divisions standing for three realms of Buddhist cosmology, the world of desires, the world of forms and the formless world. Thus humans, who have overcome desire, live in the world of forms, with no attraction to them and ultimately experience reality at its purest form in the formless world or ocean of nirvana. Thus it is without doubt, as P.H. Pott states, that the monument is something for the Buddhist pilgrims, a sort of external aid to attain the level or stage of Buddha, the level of nirvana.



 **Kāmadhātu**  **Rūpadhātu**  **Arūpadhātu** (Kartapranata)

Picture 3: Borobodur Temple ground plan in the shape of a mandala



Picture 4: Borobodur Temple central stupa

C.G. Jung, in his autobiography, Memories, Dreams, Reflections uses the term mandala to refer to circular images drawn by his patients and himself while trying to attain a sort of psychic wholeness. He describes the mandala to be a representation of “an inner image...gradually built up through (active) imagination ...when physical equilibrium is disturbed or when a thought cannot be found and must be sought for.” (Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*) Thus for Jung, in Buddhism, there are representations of the cosmos based on a “quaternary system” (Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*). As Guillemette Johnston writes, “For Jung, two attitudes (introversion/extraversion) and four function types (thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuiting) serve to measure the self-regulatory nature of the psyche. Hence, Jung adopted a form resembling the mandala when he identified the character types that describe the process of becoming conscious while trying to develop a psychoanalytic theory of individuation. The mandala serves to symbolize a process of transformation, a crossing between conscious and unconscious that provides the impetus for psychic growth.” (Johnston) Thus for Jung, the magic centre or circle of the mandala represented the gradual movement of the individual towards a sort of psychic wholeness and the mandala came to be represented as “a circle which “signifies the wholeness of the self.”²²” (Albanese 1)

In his quest for a theory of individuation, Jung uses the principle of opposites, and pits the conscious mind against the unconscious mind with the hint that proper mental health is attained when there is a “proper and harmonious balance, a right gradient, between the poles.” (Albanese 2) As such, Jung is not concerned with normal human instincts like hunger, pain, or aggression but the motives behind such instincts in the unconscious mind. And in analysing the unconscious mind, he comes across ““primordial images” which are ancient and universal thought forms of humanity.”³” (Albanese 2) Thus, they are these archetypal forms and images, common to all humans across times and cultures which reveal themselves in the conscious mind. Thus as Albanese writes, “Because of the archetypes, men will produce again and again basically similar mythical ideas. Ghosts, wizards, witches, demons, angels-and mandalas are all cases in point.” (Albanese 2)

It should be understood that for Jung, the process of individuation is ultimately a movement towards mental wholeness by passing through stages of the archetypal forms in proper sequence. It is thus a movement from the first confrontation with the evil side of human nature, to the internalized femininity or masculinity of humans, to positive and negative inflation to a standing before a mana-personality or an absolute Heavenly Father. If then, the inflation is deflated, the conscious mind is able to attend transcendence and realize the true personality, the original wholeness. (Albanese) Thus, for Jung, as evident in his own dream about the city of Liverpool, which brought a sense of finality for him, “the goal has been revealed. One could not go beyond the centre. The center is the goal, and everything is directed toward the center. Through this dream I understood that the self is the principle and archetype of orientation and meaning.” (Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* 23) Thus as one individual moves towards realization of oneself, of one’s inner consciousness, of fulfill one’s goal, one reaches the mandala which is basically the goal.

Jung is also of the opinion that quaternity archetypes are older than the Greeks and are universal expressions of one’s collective consciousness. These archetypes or symbols are fourfold and taking the shape of a mandala corroborate to the ancient ideas of four seasons, four elements, four faculties of human mind, etc. Thus the main aim is unity and wholeness and the mandala ultimately aims to attain a unity of God and man. As Edward F. Edinger elucidates, for Jung, “all images that emphasize a circle with a center and usually with the additional feature of a square, a cross, or some other representation of quaternity, fall into this category.” (Edinger 4)

As already dwelled upon, in his adoption of the mandala concept, Jung was drawing upon an Eastern traditional symbol, but interestingly, for Jung, the Eastern and Western circles or mandalas were all and the same, with both standing for a magic circle. To validate his claims, he speaks of the use of the mandalas among the Egyptians, or even among Navaho Indians. Thus

Navaho/Navajo Indians used to create sand mandalas akin to those created by Tibetan monks as the evident in Pictures 5 & 6 respectively.



(Navajo Sand Painting)

Pictures 5: Navaho Indian mandala sand painting



(Monastery)

Pictures 6: Tibetan mandala sand painting

But strangely, as Albanese writes, “Jung is possessed of a curious kind of double vision in viewing the mandalas of the East: that is, he sees and at the same time he doesn't see them in their

contextual dimension.” (Albanese) Thus for him, Eastern mandalas, in Buddhist works indicated a sort of ritualistic space and he did not analyse the psychological implications of the same, most probably because he was more interested in his patients and the concept of the overarching archetype. And in that, Jung seems to have limited himself, for he did not consider the role of the mandalas in Buddhist religious practices aiming for nirvana. Unfortunately for him, “he mistook analogy for identity” (Albanese) and equated the “uniqueness of the historical event” with the archetype. (Albanese)

III

It has been variously debated that maybe, towards the later part of his literary career, Patrick White had turned into a religious novelist – its greatest evidence lying in his novels, The Solid Mandala and Riders in the Chariot. In the latter novel, White made his four main characters conform to the quaternity of the mandala so as to transform them into the riders of the divine chariot. Interestingly, the chariot symbol is a Jungian mandala image, and White in drawing from Jung, attempts to consolidate it with symbols from the New Testament, Cabbalistic tradition, the evangelical Christian tradition and archetype presented by Jung. For he wants to state that ultimately all ways, all religious paths or mystical ways are human attempts to become one with God and the self. (Chapman 197-198) Thus White’s four seekers in the novel seek four different mystical traditions, ranging from nature, to the inner way of the spirit, to evangelical piety to use of painting to recreate the tradition of Christian art. All attempting to attain the chariot mandala, the four riders, imbued with a special Jungian psychological faculty (Chapman 198) present unity in diversity and ultimately reveal “White’s own massive Jungian mandala symbolizing an identity of humanity and divinity.” (Chapman 198)

As the title suggests, the eponymous motif of White’s The Solid Mandala is the mandala which makes its presence felt throughout the novel to bring about totality and wholeness in a spiritual sense in the main characters. Interestingly, White interweaves the mandala with simplest

of daily life happenings to most probably suggest that such wholeness is both easily accessible and attainable. And more interestingly, such easy approachability and attainability seems a departure from previously mentioned mandala formations evident in Eastern traditions. Thus White seems to do away with exoticism and the esoteric quality associated with the motif and make it more commonplace, as evident in the way in which he first uses the term to present the tension between the twin brothers Arthur and Waldo in the novel: “‘One of the carpets had,’ Arthur whimpered, ‘right in the centre, what I would say was a mandala.’....he hated his brother.” (White 30) White harps on the bitterness, the discontent, the tension between the two evident in intellectual terms and even though the two brothers attempt to unequal in all aspects, White, using the mandala motif tries unity in diversity, tries to resolve their tension into a wholeness.

White also narrates an incident when as a child, the family was coming from England and Arthur had been greatly attracted to the sun which was like a red gold disc. On his attempting to go near the rails of the ship to see, he was stopped by his mother with the stern word that he might fall off and be lost forever. Immediately Arthur had replied that “‘Yes I might. For ever.’ Feeling the cold circles eddying out and away from him.” (White 215) In the description of the waves, eddying out and way, receding in the distance behind the ship one can mark the presence of a patterned set of mandalic formations, once again referring to the fact that there is totality and wholeness in everything and he can never be lost.

The central mandalic motifs in novel are the marbles used by Arthur which are once again in tune with White’s use of things from everyday life and which in a sense are representative of the finer things in life that Arthur is bereft of. White wonderfully describes Arthur preoccupation with and dependence on the marbles:

He was different then, in several ways. But did not mind since he had the marbles.

However many marbles Arthur had – there were always those which got lost, and some he traded for other things – he considered four his permanencies. There were

the speckled gold and the cloudy blue. There were the whorl of green and crimson circlets. There was the taw with a knot at the centre, which made him consider palming it off, until, on looking long and close, he discovered the knot was the whole point.

Of all these jewels or touchstones, talismans or sweethearts, Arthur Brown got to love the knotted one the best.... (White 228)

In this context, Bill Ashcroft opines that “Arthur sees the ‘flaw’, that the ‘knot’ at the centre of his marble, is the ‘whole point.’ The mandala shows that man is ‘surrounded’ by perfection in the sense that it remains the ultimate horizon of his existence, and while wholeness is unenclosable by consciousness, man ‘obtains’ infinity when he becomes aware of its imitation in ordinary experience.” (Ashcroft 126) Thus the presence of the four marbles replicate the quaternity of the mandala and the knot in the marble the centre, the goal for wholeness. Interestingly, the knot in the marble, which ultimately Arthur had decided to give Waldo, also symbolically represents the opacity in Waldo’s nature as contrasted to the openness in Arthur. Unfortunately, Waldo does not get the marble in the end, for it is lost in a back alley the night he dies and symbolically reveals White’s design of unrequited hope associated with his life.

Arthur also realizes that, as Ken Godwin opines, he is the keeper of the mandalas and it is only he who can stop them from being misrepresented as mere marbles. For him, such crassness of opinion needed to be avoided and hence his aim was always to protect the mandalas. He also realises that all these ideas were his own and he was not in a position to impose his views on others, especially his brother. Still, he wanted to protect and honour the mandalas for they would reveal, he believed, the wholeness and totality all humans aspire for. With time, “Arthur contemplates his marble almost in a religious sense, seeing in it mysteries, realities, symbols, and significances – an endless range of reality enclosed in a miniature universe.” (Walsh 92) And in that, he connected to the Jungian concept of mandalic totality which is a conscious presence in the novel evident in the

incident when Arthur goes to the house of Mrs. Musto and read from the encyclopaedia the meaning of a mandala:

‘The mandala is a symbol of totality. It is believed to be the “dwelling place of the god.” Its protective circle is a pattern of order super-imposed on – psychic- chaos. Sometimes its geometric form is seen as a vision (either waking or in a dream) or—’

His voice had fallen to the most elaborate hush.

‘Or danced,’ Arthur read. (White 238)

After such a reading, he is able to synchronize his personal vision with the vision of entire mankind and lead him onto his mandalic dance. He asks his father the meaning of totality but his father is clueless making realise that, none, not even Waldo knew it and that “it was himself who was, and would remain, the keeper of mandalas, who must guess their final secret through touch and light.” (White 240) “So Arthur Brown danced, beginning at the first corner, from which he would proceed through 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.” (White 265) to bring to a culmination and climax the mandala motif in the novel.

Thus, Arthur dances to integrate the various components of his life, and embodies the entire (McCulloch 52) meaning of the text according to Ann McCulloch. Melinda Jewell quoting from Rodney Edgecombe opines that “it allows Arthur to order his life into ‘pattern and significance’ (84), a pattern and design that Ratnakar Sadawarte feels resembles an Indian spiritual practice called Tantra Sadhana (40).” (Jewell 36) Before he starts, Arthur states that he would dance a mandala, referring to his conception from the encyclopaedia and one can realise that White intentionally connects the mandala motif with dance to allow Arthur to overcome his surroundings, his emotional and physical problems and live beyond the intellectuality of his brother.

Thus Thelma Herring finds the mandalas to be the main linking devices in the novel, represented through Arthur's four marbles which ultimately present the oneness of the self. Through abundant usage of imagery and allusions, like the lotus, the wheel, the rose, etc., White constructs a network of mandalic symbols which culminate in Arthur's mandala or ritualistic or tantric dance and enable him to realize his true self. And lastly, as Joseph Jones opines, to the mandala formations in the lives of the characters is added White's own design regarding the chapters and narrative style. He uses four chapters with the first and the fourth framing the second and third, and also uses two long flashbacks, twin consciousness, twin characters and their twin dilemmas to unearth meaning, both in their lives and for the novel and bring the solid mandala to a culmination.

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