



Effect of Colonial Power on Hybridization in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*

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Abstract

Remembering Babylon by David Malouf is an award winning post-colonial novel dealing with yet other multiple themes like colonialism, ecology, identity. Colonialism having had a great deal of after effects on all the nonwestern countries, Malouf arranges events in the novel that lines with colonial practices and their effects on both colonized and the colonizer in return. The paper thus deals with those practices that lead to the unfolding of many changes which included perceptions and pre conceived notions. The colonial practices are analyzed as different tools in the paper along with the effect that followed amidst the settlers.

Keywords: wild, Other, Object, Proprietorship, Language, Hybridization

1. Introduction

David Malouf, a prolific Australian writer born to a Lebanese father and a Jewish English mother, graduated from the university of Queensland. Before becoming a full time writer in 1978 he lectured in Australia and London for twenty years. Malouf wrote many novels and novellas about Australia. As he majorly wrote during both the wars, many of his novels are war themed bringing out the life of many of its men, their life and death situation in the trenches, the brotherhood they shared in the Warfield and so on. Malouf has published not only several award-winning novels and novellas but also several plays.

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His first novel is semi-autobiographical named *Johnno* which details on his boyhood in Brisbane. The novel was later adapted as a film in 2004. *Remembering Babylon*, a novel published in 1993 is a recipient of commonwealth prize and also has been short listed for Booker prize. The novel portrays nineteenth century Australia, when the British people considered Australia as an extended land or place of their country. It depicted the attitude of the nineteenth century people, where they always wanted to recreate the land so as to resemble their homeland. The fear of the wild and the unknown is yet another thread line that is drawn throughout the novel.

1.1. Literature review

The novel has been studied widely for the rich matters of concern that relate to the present-day scenario. An analysis on the mystic and spiritual experience of the characters is made by David Meyers. A study on post-colonial effect which includes third space, mimicry has been made. The novel is also studied as a struggle between first nations people and colonizer in the Elements of post colonialism and cultural hybridity. The subtle representation of ecology in the novel has made it possible for yet another study of spatial representation, naming of the place and the hybridization of the aborigines. A study on the uncanniness of Australian landscape, and the historical friction is made. The novel being a ground for rich diversity of themes a view on the psychological effect is rendered. This paper however deals with the colonial practices, that has encountered and created a difference in identifying colonizers themselves with the place that they tried colonizing. The possibility of hybridization that helped the settlers find their new identity shapes the paper throughout.

1.2. Research questions

The novel dealing with colonialism and its after effects sets a path for the analysis of its after effects, wherein the paper deals with the question of the possibility of acquiring a hybrid identity by the very settlers who imposed change on the land and the aborigines. Will the change so caused, result in anything good for the relationship between the settlers and aborigines? Will the gift of civilization reap its fruits amidst the aborigines in the novel?

2. The West and the Wild Encounter:

Western values have always contrasted with the hostile environment of the natives. This can be perceived as “encounter between the civilized and the wild” (Marrouchi 29). One of the influential theorists in the field of post colonialism, named Edward Said states in his work *Orientalism* that, westerners perceive the east to be exotic, mystified, and that they carry all the dark traits, while perceive

themselves to be civilized and rationalized. It is with such imperial gaze that the Other is defined, that Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* says that the westerners have made a man of themselves by creating 'slaves and monsters'.

This concept of wild being uncivilized and barbaric among the westerners is much evident in the novel. As Ashcroft suggests in order to maintain their superiority the self has to be described as different from the Other. The authority of the west over the colonized is established by merely undermining everything that is not west. They perceive the natives to be a mass instead of individuals with different abilities and perceptions. Gemmy in the novel is described as a creature that is half human and half animal. He is not even considered to be a human instead is tagged to be an in between creature. The shock of meeting such being who is foreign to them is so much intensified that they naturally associate him to aborigines whom they perceive to be untamed or uncivilized. Moreover, the only language or contact that Gemmy can relate to in the land is his immediate environment. Gemmy's intense connection with nature and the surrounding environment creates a picture of him to be wild. As westerners regard nature and wilderness to be carrying mystical powers, the settlers in an instance even begin to be prejudiced with Gemmy, imagining that the stone that is given to Gemmy carries some mystical powers.

Objectification of the Other:

John McLeod in his book *Beginning Post- Colonialism*, says about Franz Fanon, a psychiatrist and political philosopher that, "...Fanon's identity is defined in negative terms by those in a position of power. He is forced to see himself not as a human subject, with his own wants and needs..., but an object, a peculiarity at the mercy of a group that identifies him as inferior, less than fully-human, placed at the mercy of their definitions and representations" (*Beginning Post- Colonialism* 20). Likewise, Gemmy is being so used to westerners' point of view of the aborigines, where they have always been the deciding authority that, in the beginning he doesn't even put forth an opinion for himself and tries to accept being their object. This naturally projects the westerners' superiority which is bestowed upon them by the colonized themselves.

However Gemmy, who seemed a bit different from the rest of the natives was immediately recognized by Jock unlike the rest of the settlers, embraces him, and even shelters him though with a lot of self-doubt and fear, nullifying the archive of the Self. However, Jock and his family undergo hostility from their fellow settlers when they denied to objectify themselves, or when they denied to represent their culture, as they were attacked by the fellow settlers who cut open the throat of the geese that they have been nurturing.

The Need for Upper Hand:

Proprietorship is a common settler's attitude that Malouf discusses in his novels. Settlers in such foreign land as these, where they know nothing either about the land or the people, fills them with an insecure feeling which obviously makes them want to call something their own, so that they will continue to be the upper hand. The fear of being tainted with the natives, is a part of colonial discourse, where they tend to lose their authenticity, thereby their superior identity. "Barney, in his anxious way, was forever out there pacing the line and looking for signs of trespass; except that there was no line, and the trespass too might be no more than a shadow on Barney's thoughts, and how could you deal with that?" (65). This brings forth the settlers preoccupation to own the land, where they don't even want to let the aborigines pass by, as they know that the land surely belongs to the aborigines whose names are printed on a 'number document' in a faraway office in 'Brisbane'. Thus, taking advantage of the fact that this document has little to no value in this wilderness, the settlers try to celebrate their ownership over the little-known land while Gemmy who actually belongs to the land liberates himself from possessing the land, and builds a relationship with the land.

Language as a Powerful Tool:

Language being an important tool to take hold of the aboriginal land by imparting settlers' culture and their lifestyle among the aborigines is used vividly in Malouf's novel. Frantz Fanon, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* asserts that "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture." (Black Skin, White Masks- 25). Language is a cultural tool through which the colonizer annihilates other expressive forms and where the colonized takes up the culture of the colonizer and involves in their world. David Malouf implies how language carries culture through Gemmy and George Abbot in the novel. George Abbot the headmaster, jotting down the life of gemmy in order to investigate and regulate him represents their imperialistic cultural impositions on him. He would never want Children walking through or working through the lands instead, he would insist them to attend school, corresponding with the concept of White man's burden by Rudyard Kipling, where imperialism and colonialism is put into more appealing terms like taking up the burden or the responsibility of educating the natives.

Beyond Culture and Language: A Hybrid Identity

Gemmy has no proper language and is beyond culture as he is tamed by the Britishers and rescued by the Africans. The only time he made utterances of language was when he had to protect his skin and when he wanted to have his fill of food, which had been characterised by his sudden realisation of words and forgetfulness of words. When Gemmy catches hold of any object that is authentically English, he is seen to recognize them with the English word but finds it difficult to utter the word. Gemmy who had been a 'British object' while in the English country, later loses his language and hence his identity as he is thrown into the sea. With the lack of language, he was bewildered to be comfortable in his own skin

in front of the settlers. "...he could never look at Lanchlan even if all he was doing was larking about in a childish way" (RB 35). However, he is then recognized with his aboriginal culture through his interaction with the land and with the native people. Thus, his aboriginal identity overlaps the western identity leading to a hybrid identity where he seems to be half white and half aborigine. Furthermore, amidst strong oppositions from the fellow villagers for sheltering Gemmy there were a couple of settlers who could not only understand Gemmy but also understand his deep connection with the land. This has made the settler characters to adapt to the aboriginal attitude towards the land, in the novel leading to their hybrid identity.

Remembering Babylon carrying a well-established post-colonial insights, deciphers a lot of colonial myths through its characters. The general attitude of colonisers where they become a threat to the colonized is reversed with the emergence of Gemmy into the scene. There were certain settlers who could understand Gemmy by his mere gestures. His aboriginal connection with nature paved way for certain settlers like Janet and Frazer to understand him, leading them to a process of hybridization. Mr. Frazer though develops an aversion towards Gemmy in the beginning, on later stages he understands how freely Gemmy can interact with the land. He understands that it is not the alien land or its nature that threatens the whites but the lack of their connectivity with the land. "Good reason, that, for stripping it, as soon as you could manage, of every vestige of the native; for ringbarking and clearing and reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a bit like home"(9).

Homi Bhabha says that an important transformation in the outlook of the colonizer and the colonized occurs when the "effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions" (112). The imperialistic attitude of Frazer is thus altered and becomes conscious of the essence of the environment around. This alters the general concept of colonialism where the whites who take up the burden of leading the aborigines into civilization now lets the aborigines to lead them in to the wild. Thus Frazer in an instance says,

It is habitable already. I think of our early settlers, starving on these shores in the midst of plenty they did not recognize, in a blessed nature of flesh, fowl, fruit that was all around them and which they could not, with their English eyes, perceive, since the very habit and faculty that makes apprehensible to us what is known and expected dulls our sensitivity to other forms, even the most obvious. (RB 118)

Mr. Frazer who didn't want to make Australia look like England, is a sure sign of him taking up a different perspective of the place he has occupied in, unlike a coloniser.

Janet who always looked back on the English life in Scotland was despondent of losing a life of her dreams. However there came a transformation in her on realising the nature of the land. The joy that filled her for the English land itself abounded her as the swarm of bees created a congenial environment for her. This hybrid state of hers caused from socio ecological consciousness led to the resilience of settler attitude where the understanding of her immediate environment led her to understand the alien place and its inhabitants despite its hostility and discontentment. "I sometimes think that that was all I

ever knew of him: what struck me in that moment before I knew him at all. When he was up there [on the fence] before he fell, poor fellow, and became just—there’s nothing clear in my head of what he might have been before that, and afterwards he was just Gemmy, someone we loved” (RB 177).

Hutchence, yet another settler character is seen in the novel as a guardian to Gemmy as she shelters him when the whole community rejected him for his identity. She is also portrayed as a character who introduces bee hives to Janet, her fellow settler. Malouf sets in a striking contrast to highlight the act of hybrid identity where one sheds the narrowed perception and opens up to the possibilities of life. While Hutchence limited herself to one of the colonial practices of mixing the imported bees with the native ones to make herself open to huge returns, Janet is seen to perceive the bees to be creatures that open her to her spiritual self, a self that brought her contentment in life. This made the process of taking a new identity beyond her narrowed self that always made her believe that there is no joy beyond the ideal lands. Being newly led to this identity she finds joy in the wild which was nearly impossible for most of the settler characters in the novel.

3. Conclusions

Thus, Gemmy being an in-between creature remains indefinable by language, as he washed away the papers where his life events were transcribed. This pictures him shunning down the cultural imposition on him, as he believed that washing away with water can drain away the colonial culture and regain his aboriginal spirit. Racism which was at its peak in the beginning of the novel is seen to fade away with their hybrid identity where they could see the natives as inspiration rather than a threat or fear of the unknown. Gemmy thus, fills the gap between aborigines and the settlers where a positive influence from the land is bought out as many of the settlers accept the landscape and understand its nature, despite the hostility and the alienation they had to face in the beginning of the novel. This cancels the differences between both the settlers and the aborigines and helps them understand each other better.

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Silvia Olives is a PhD student In English Literature from Bishop Heber College, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu. Her research interest is in Australian Literature. The research revolves around David Malouf's novel and his ideas on human relation with the natural environment. The research is based on many of ecological concepts which includes bioregionalism. Bioregionalism being a thriving concept, brings in the inclusion of culture which formulates the practices of humans belonging to a place and the direct effect of this inclusion on the surrounding environment. Malouf dealing with colonialism and war in most of his novels becomes a ground for the researcher, to analyse the possibility of reinhabitation and rewilding in his novels.