

# Exploring The Otherness Of The White Subject In David Malouf's Novel Remembering Babylon: A Study Of The Antagonism Of The Estranged European Community In Colonial Australia

Babylona Bora

MA, Tezpur University.

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## Abstract

The British colonisers had launched an invasion and established military bases in around 171 countries throughout the globe. Australia was no different. The founding of a prison colony on the Australian mainland in January 1788 is said to have sown the seeds of the first settlement on the continent. The British created other colonies on the continent in the following century, and European explorers explored its interiors. Indigenous Australians were severely harmed, and their numbers eventually dwindled. Remembering Babylon, a novel by David Malouf based on historical evidence explores the life of a young man adopted by Australian aborigines. The novel ponders the politics of identity and hybridity, cultural experiences, language, and xenophobia to bring into the fore the antagonism between the two communities – the oppressors and the oppressed. Keeping this in mind, the paper will attempt to investigate the worldview of an isolated European population in colonial Australia, as well as their position in relation to the protagonist, Gemma Fairley. A sequence of difficulties and contradictions emerge in the portrayal of Gemmy Fairley, the 'white black' man at the centre of the narrative, nearly to the point of exposing the actual insidious nature of the erstwhile colonisers. The paper will attempt to face the plethora of possibilities that result from the interplay of the two societies.

**Keywords:** Other, Post colonialism, hybridity, identity, self

## Introduction

Imagine the terror of a settlement after discovering "one of their own" in the garb of the imagined Other. The whiteness of a lost-at-sea young man who discovers community life in the indigenous aborigines of Australia is put under trial by the estranged British subjects on the other part of the shared landscape in this novel. Strwn together from pieces of historical evidence about a young man adopted by the aborigines of Australia, Remembering Babylon written by David Malouf ruminates on the politics of identity and hybridity, cultural experiences, language and xenophobia. The perception of a human being as a "thing",

“scarecrow” emerging from “beyond the no man’s land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome” (Chapter 1) was not an uncommon one during the heyday of the colonial mission of the Europeans. It was commonplace and therefore pervaded the consciousness of the dominant self who had colonised almost 85% of earth’s surface by the 1940s. While the text deals heavily with the identity of Gemmy Fairley, it complicates and problematizes the very idea of racism and colonialism vis-a-vis the representation of the whites and their enormous cultural differences in a home away from their parent state i.e. Britain. Malouf explores the positioning of the postcolonial subject on the various kinds of thresholds and “stresses the graphics of individuation, especially with regard to the postcolonial predicaments of diaspora, displacement, migration, hybridity, etc.” (Bulman-May 65) Keeping this at the fore, the paper shall try to explore the worldview of an estranged European community in colonial Australia and study their positioning vis a vis the character, Gemma Fairley.

### **Analysis**

The novel is set in the mid-19th century, in the outback of Queensland and deals directly with opposing cultures; that of new White settlers and of the Aborigines. It is a story about an English sea victim (Gemmy Fairley) who was cast asunder in Australian coast, similar to Robison Crusoe, Roderick Random etc. and is taken by Aborigines for a period of 16 years until his “return” to white civilization in the first chapter. Over the 16 years, he forgets his English tongue and acquires a new identity, new repertoire of body language and verbal utterances. In the portrayal of Gemmy Fairley, the ‘white black’ man positioned at the centre of the text, a series of conflicts and contradictions come to the fore of consciousness, almost at the risk of exposing the true insidious nature of the erstwhile colonisers. The colonized faction is acquainted with the previous denomination as those who were responsible for the decimation of dominant cultural and social value system of the natives of the land. The British colonizers had charged an invasion and established a military presence in about 171 countries of the world. Australia was no exception. It has been recorded that the first settlement on the Australian mainland sprouted its roots as a result of the establishment of a penal colony in January 1788. In the century that followed, the British established other colonies on the continent, and European explorers ventured into its interiors. Indigenous Australians were greatly weakened and their numbers diminished gradually. Gemmy Fairley washes up on the coast of a settlement occupied by the indigenous tribe (referred to as ‘Blacks’ throughout the text) who then proceeds to shelter him albeit their anxiety of the foreign. He eventually “lost [sic] his old language in the new one that came to his lips” (Chapter 2). He was an in between creature for the Blacks. He was somebody who was trapped in the blurred visions of his past life.

“‘Do not shoot’, it shouted. ‘I am a B-b-british object!’” (Chapter 1). These words were fearfully uttered by Gemmy when he was discovered on the other side of the fence. All that lay across the fence was unknown to the Whites. Even in full sunlight it was an impenetrable “darkness”. A kinship was shortly established not in a shared language, but in terms of appearance. His “sun bleached and pale straw colored hair as their own” (Chapter 1) magnified their anxiety twofold, for Gemmy was an outsider who spent his formative period with a

community so despised and feared. “Was he in league with the blacks? As infiltrator, as a spy?” (Chapter 3). The double-ness of his identity pushed the Whites into a state of anxiety. It did not matter that he was of a similar skin colour. The ‘double-voiced’ discourse in which Gemmy participates was looked at with suspicion. Both postcolonial and African-American theories of US racial dynamics claim that the colonised ‘other’ learns to speak a ‘double-voiced’ discourse, speaking both the dominant culture’s language and the subordinated culture’s language, as W. E. B. DuBois put it. Not a colonized or racial other, but as a cultural other, Gemmy was turned and again eliminated from any entry into the order of affairs at this Western frontier. As a cultural other, Gemmy spent the entirety of his childhood with the aborigines of the land. “In taking on, by second nature as it were, this new language of looks and facial gestures, he had lost his white man’s appearance, especially for white men who could no longer see what his looks intended, and become in their eyes black” (Chapter 3). The novel astutely captures the hybridity and difference within members of the same community i.e. the Europeans. It is not simply a narrative about distinct binary oppositions. As postcolonial critic Ania Loomba argues, “in reality any simple binary opposition between ‘colonisers’ and ‘colonised’ or between races is undercut by the fact that there are enormous cultural and racial differences within each of these categories as well as crossovers between them” (112). Such hybridity is inherently deconstructive, as it breaks down any possibility of a stable binary opposition.

The novel in this context suffers from dissolution of identity. The cultural diversity and cultural differences among the Whites on the other side of the fence signals the formation of a Third Space (It is a postcolonial sociolinguistic theory of identity and community achieved through language or education, according to Homi K Bhabha. Homi K. Bhabha is credited with the idea. As a “hybrid,” Third Space Theory describes the uniqueness of each person, actor, or circumstance). It fervently seeks to destabilize the perceived notions of centre versus periphery. Janet McIvor (daughter of McIvors, Fairely’s foster family) shares an unspoken, secret affinity with Gemmy. She yearns for her original home, desires an enunciation of language spoken in Scotland of which Lachlan Beattie, her cousin is a signifier. Both Janet and Gemmy are in search of that trace of home in the Australian land. Lachlan’s mastery of the Scottish tongue and his ultimate dominance over Janet is symptomatic of the British colonizers’ disdain of the Anglo-Indians. “He was full of scorn when she failed to understand some words he used, and took delight, with their mother, in slipping into the old tongue.” But even Lachlan’s arrogance takes a soft turn when he helps Gemmy with translation of the words which he could only produce in a distorted form. “He would, out of deference to the adults, make a sign in their direction, and when they failed to grasp it, turn to Lachlan; or someone in the crowd itself would. ‘What is it, lad? What’s he trying to say?’” (Chapter 5) In Lachlan’s characterization, we discover the author’s attempt at restoring a beast into a man.

As James Bulman May writes, “In Remembering Babylon the acceptance of the ‘nigredean’ stranger takes place in the course of children’s play. Here Gemmy, a blackened white man whose colour coding, like Michael Ondaatje’s English patient is inverted, is taken hostage by the Scottish boy Lachlan Beattie who has been sent to live with relatives in Australia” (71). The little, manly pride in him at “capturing” a “a half caste” slowly exposed

unto himself his own bigotry and xenophobia. Later in the years, Lachlan redeems himself by outgrowing his indifference and dehumanization of the Other. In his deliberate treatment of Gemmy Fairley as merely his shadow, and his female cousin as a weak, dispassionate woman Lachlan exposes his own incompetency and his imagined perception as an outsider into the already settled community of Europeans. The desire to assert his dominance reveals his insecurities which later plays into an exploiter-exploited relationship with Janet and Gemmy. Lachlan, later comfortable in his skin and an adult with conscience is witnessed protecting the rights of a German immigrant in Australia.

### **Conclusion**

The desire to replicate the ways of life and living in Australia coupled with cultural and traditional beliefs of the English stands challenged with the arrival of David Malouf's postcolonial compound sign (By merging two or more separate signs, it conveys a single concept) Gemmy Fairley. Their assumed superiority is challenged and countered by the oppositional beliefs of the Blacks. The realisation of a financial inferiority when compared to their parent state and the ultimate erasure of the reified subject-object dichotomy in their assumption of both the roles in an alternate manner dawns upon two characters, Dr Frazer and George Abbot respectively. "...as you meet here face to face in the sun, you and all you stand for have not yet appeared over the horizon of the world, so that after a moment all the wealth of it goes dim in you, then is cancelled altogether, and you meet at last in a terrifying equality that strips the last rags from your soul.." (Chapter 3). The indigenous population are yet to be marginalised and separated from their cultural practices. The so called modern, rational, contemporary discourse of the British colonizers was yet to ravage their existence. Gemmy Fairley thus acts as the catalyst that activates in other people their tendency to look at every contour of the society with a questioning gaze - all against his own will. He is a mere reflection of the people's anxieties and insecurities in a land which is not their own in terms of shared history (between the aborigines "the savages" and the Whites). His appearance threatens the often contested labels of 'national' identity, or racial identity, or ethnic identity of the Europeans. The idea of a subject hood as multiply constructed, with infinite possibilities for what constitutes a subject or an 'I' identity achieves a nuanced treatment at this juncture of identity politics.

The antagonistic impulses projected onto the figure of Gemmy Fairley makes us wonder if sympathisers from the same community will be subjected to the pattern of violence of which the former is a victim. His whiteness does not guarantee him any welcomed entry to the community represented by the likes of Ned Corcoran and Andy Mckillop who endorsed the cruel extermination of the unknown, foreign Other. The air pregnant with their anxiety driven impulses provoked them to "get rid of 'em, once and for all" (Chapter 6) as iterated by Ned Corcoran for "they had seen what happened to blacks in places where the locals were kind. It wasn't a pleasant sight" (Chapter 6). The fear of the other had manipulated their minds into subscribing to the so called ethos of a masculine in nature, aggressive and hate driven politics which warrants an outsider-free state of being, both in the mind and physical sense of the world. A detailed focus on the changes of consciousness generated by the controversial arrival of the

“outsider” and his affirmative action is thus attempted by the author in the novel. Malouf's sentimental grasp over words and emotion of the characters releases him from the scrutiny of the reader who seeks a reformatory solution to the injustice meted out on weaker bodies. Gemmy is neither White nor Black. He is a postcolonial, poststructuralist subject who engages with a free play of meanings. As Bhabha roughly argues in *The Location of Culture* about how Hybridity or transnationalism is a challenge to that idea of a unified ‘imaginary community;’ hybridity brings up the idea that you might belong to many communities or cultures at once, and transnationalism forays into the idea that identity may not be determined by national boundaries, either political or geographic. No wonder then that the arrival of a “mangy, half starved look of a black” young, white man in the territory occupied by the Europeans rattled their peaceful lives.

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