

## Identity Crisis and Displacement in Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*: A Postcolonial Critique

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper highlights the sufferings of Australians in colonial and postcolonial eras. The study mainly focuses on the dehumanizing effects of colonial exploitative regime on the colonized. It is a critique of British colonial enterprise and its psychological repercussions on the psyche of the colonized people. It further explores the concepts of displacement, identity crisis and hybridity in Australian society. In David Malouf's novel *Remembering Babylon*, the protagonist Gemmy experiences the dilemma of identity crisis and displacement when he dares to cross the boundaries that separate the civilized world from the uncivilized. He lost his true identity in this process and became an alien within his own community. He is not accepted by the native people and the white settlers both so it raised a question mark on his real identity and his sense of belongingness. After living for sixteen years with the Aboriginal Australians and adopting their ways and means of living, he looks more like them than the people of his own white race. Therefore, he is not accepted by the colonizers and they make him a victim of oppression and subjugation. Not only Gemmy but there are also many other characters in the novel who are suffering from the same situation. The characters' sense of affinity has been eroded by dislocation with which identity crisis emerges. The basic concepts of Ashcroft et al's place, displacement and identity crisis and Bhabha's hybridity under postcolonialism help understand the suffering of native people in *Remembering Babylon* by Malouf.

### Keywords:

Postcolonialism, identity crisis, displacement, hybridity, colonizers, Aborigines

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### Introduction:

The concepts of colonialism, imperialism, identity crisis, hybridity, place and displacement are of vital significance in the postcolonial theory. The postcolonial theory endeavors to provide space to the marginalized to vocalize for themselves to give rebuttal to the western

philosophy that declares the colonized people as inferior, savage, uncivilized and having no identity under white colonizers. European colonialism involves the subjugation and exploitation of the native people that imposed colonial customs upon the marginalized groups as Ronald Horvath (1972) envelops the situation in these words: "Colonialism is a form of

domination – the control by individuals or groups over the territory and/or behavior of other individuals or groups” (p. 46). Colonizers covered a vast area of earth through conquering and seizing land and its resources and made clear cut distinction between the orient and the occident, and treated the native as ‘other’. “Colonialism was a lucrative commercial operation, bringing wealth and riches to Western nations through the economic exploitation of others” (McLeod, 2000, p. 7).

British colonialism began to fall under the eruption of resistance movements from the inhabitants of the colonized states and decolonization started with the independence of once dominated peoples who took reigns of affairs in their own hands. Young (2016) argues, “Postcolonial critique focuses on forces of oppression and coercive domination ...: the politics of anti-colonialism and neocolonialism, race, gender, nationalisms, class and ethnicities define its terrain” (p. 11). Postcolonialism appears as the result of colonialism. The basic aim of post colonialism is to turn down the euro-centric myth of universalism. The political and social interests of post colonialism can be traced back to the 1950s with the publication of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/1967) and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958/1992). The propounders of this theory measure the means through which the postcolonial writers laboriously struggle to reinstate a pre-colonial status of their nations and their cultural identities which must be uncontaminated and untainted by the colonial past. The Postcolonial studies has not only challenged the European hegemony and the Universalist claims of Eurocentric myth but also the complementary assertions of global particularism and cultural relativism. One of the central tenets of Postcolonialism is the idea of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one’s culture, belief, and practices are superior to that of other. During the period of colonialism,

British rule believed in their superiority to other cultures. Such thoughts exist even after the period of colonialism e.g. American hegemony over the world is the example of this thought. Overall, West has control on our thought, culture, system of education, morality and ethics. Various writers have reflected this theory in their work such as Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Michael Ondaatje, Frantz Fanon, Jamaica Kincaid, Isabelle Allende, J. M. Coetzee, and Derek Walcott. David Malouf is one of them.

David George Joseph Malouf was born in Brisbane, Australia in 1943. His father was a Lebanese-Christian and mother was an English Jew who tied the knot in Australia. After teaching at various institutions, Malouf became a full-time writer. Malouf has earned a great reputation as one of Australia’s well-known authors who can write autobiography, drama, fiction, libretto, poetry and short stories. The setting of most of his works is Australia. He tries to connect past with the present and human beings with the nature. His first novel, *Johnno*, is semi-autobiographical and first published in 1975. His another novel *Remembering Babylon* (1994) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. The novel deals with the postcolonial issues like crises of identity, displacement, ambivalence, mimicry, hybridity and language etc. The novel revolves around the story of Gemmy, the half British, half aboriginal boy, who has spent first half of his early life in the British Isles and the other half with the inhabitants of a native tribe in Australia’s outback (Saeed, Imran, Ahmad, and Akbar, 2020). The novel deals with the interaction between the Europeans and Aborigines. The narrative takes an unusual turn when Gemmy crossed the demarcation line that separates the aborigines and the white European settlers. Gemmy’s thought that he is white and would be welcomed in the white community backfires unfortunately when the British settlers do not accept him but turns him into a victim of oppression and racism in the settlement (Ahmad,

Akhtar, Ilyas, and Abbas, 2021). The depiction of the confrontation between the two opponent groups – the whites and the Aborigines – projects the contemporary issues regarding endemic communities residing at the fringes of the modern world that faces much disapprobation. Malouf represents the dual personality of the protagonist to reveal him as an in-between creature when he finally dared to cross the boundary.

Malouf has sketched another character, Mrs. Hutchence, who is the true portrayal of hybrid identity. She is the mixture of native and western civilizations. She wears dirty boots as she works on her field like men but has cane furniture which depict her two sided nature and the readers reflect upon her hybrid identity. Bhabha (1994) has developed this notions of 'hybridity' and 'third space', "where difference is neither 'one' nor the 'other' but, *something else besides, in-between*" (p. 129). The character of Janet, Lachlan and George Abbot truly represent their hybrid identities under colonial situation.

### **Literature review:**

Postcolonialism contains all the literature stimulated by the cultural process from the instant of colonization to the present day independence. It evaluates the suppression of the colonizers and the postcolonial theory discusses the various kinds of experiences like slavery, racial discrimination and also the resistance and struggle of the subjugated people. David Malouf's work *Remembering Babylon* (1994) has been evaluated throughout the world and his other major works are based on postcolonial world with the themes of hybridity, displacement, language and identity crisis.

Crisis of identity is the most common theme in all postcolonial writings. In the past centuries, through forced and voluntary migration, the displaced people undergo a traumatic experience of alienation in the place where they

struggle to relocate themselves. Saman Abdulqadir Hussein Dizayi (2015) highlights that identity crisis is the most controversial issue in the present world and one of the main subject matters of postcolonial literature. It is widely discussed by postcolonial writers in their works because this issue can be regarded as the most important issue after the colonies gained freedom from the clutches of colonizers. Many postcolonial societies still face the dilemma of identity crisis. In the contemporary world, the number of immigrants is at its peak which surfaces the question of identity of these people. He mentions that after WW II the newly gained independence of the nation's leads people to recreate their social and individual identities.

The concept of hybridity evolves with the mixture of two different cultures within the colonial boundaries. According to Bill Ashcroft et al (2007), the term hybridity is associated with the creation of a new 'transcultural form' across the borders when the combination of entirely two different species forms a third hybrid specie. Hybridity produces double consciousness in an individual's mind and he is forced to accept hybrid identity. The Postcolonial theorists have focused on the hybridity which emerges as a consequence of interaction between the colonizers and the colonized and it has been discussed in many colonial discourses. Sohaimi Abdul Aziz (2016) describes the colonial discourse as a discourse from colonialists curbing and humiliating the colonized. The colonialists had a firm belief in their own ideology, culture and race. They considered it superior to that of colonized countries. This faith is known as Ethnocentrism which is highly mixed with Orientalism which was actually collection of ideas and theories of west in relation to Eastern culture. Postcolonial discourse refers to literary work giving vent to the feeling and voices of colonized people against the colonialist.

*The Lonely Londoner* (2014) by Sam Selvon is a postcolonial novel that portrays the plight of Caribbean migrants encountering the colonial center of London. Saman Abdulqadir Hussein Dizayi (2016) throws light on how the black immigrants suffered in London. In the novel Selvon portrays one of the important postcolonial issues of identity crisis. He shows how they suffer from the angst of distorted identity and displacement in London. Their effort to be well-mannered and civilized with others and their English accent cannot earn them a better place in London. Consequently, the black people's illusion about white as polite, courteous and hospitable was broken.

William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* provides a comprehensive critique on post colonial issues such as language, power, identity and hybridity. Nabila Islam (2015) projects the colonizers' use of various kinds of tools such as intellectual, political, psychological, and lingual etc to maintain their hegemony over colonized. Prospero suffers from identity crisis and displacement when he was exiled to an island by his brother Antonio. Later on, Prospero dominated over that island and subjugated its inhabitants with his magical powers. The issue of race is highlighted through the characters of Caliban and Prospero as slave and master respectively and Caliban was exploited by his master Prospero.

Caribbean literature like other colonial literatures projects the problems of crisis of identity, hybridity, dislocation, rootlessness and fragmented psychology as a result of colonialism. V.S. Naipaul, a Caribbean author, deals with the subject matters of identity crisis, hybridity and displacement in his works. His well-known work *The Mimic Men* (1967) is a critique of the traumatic experiences of colonization. Tahsin Culhaoglu (2015) explicates that the novel is about the experiences of Caribbean people, their colonization, subjection, victimization,

subjugation, dehumanization and distinction by the European colonialisers. Ralph Singh – the protagonist of *The Mimic Men* – feels without a background, history and identity because of his uprootedness which symbolizes his search for identity and belongingness (Akhtar and Hayat, 2020). According to Ralph the European masters have made them heavily dependent on them and disrupted their sense of dignity.

Many critics have applauded Malouf's concentration on Australian history, social structure, politics, language individual and national identity in the work under study. Nazan Yildiz (2018) points out the fragility of human identity within the British colonies. According to Yildiz, Malouf presents the native culture through a white black child whose hybrid identity is questioned by the white settlers. James Tulip (1996) affirms that the novel deals with "the story of acceptance, rejection and a partial reconciliation" (p. 69). Furthermore, it explores the sense of loss after the episode of colonization. The characters feel that they have lost their sense of identity especially Gemmy who becomes the victim of double consciousness due to his third space between aborigines and settlers but he gets partial acknowledgement from both the civilizations.

### **Research Methodology:**

This research comes under the domain of qualitative mode of enquiry. Ashcroft et al's concept of place and displacement, identity crisis and Homi K. Bhabha's notion of hybridity support the research to investigate the text from postcolonial perspective. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2002) have used the term postcolonial literature to describe the literatures rooted in national culture of the postcolonial nations that endeavor to reconstruct their new identities with the help of their pre-colonial past and colonial experiences. So the postcolonial theorists are interested in exploring the identity from the

writings of African, Asian, Australian and diasporic etc writers. Postcolonial literature discusses the issues of power, hegemony, identity crisis, place and displacement; the mass displacement of people is a significant consequence of European colonial enterprise. There may be multiple reasons behind the displacement from home land which are penned down in the literary texts. Ashcroft et al elaborated it further that an individual's vigorous sense of self and belongingness with one's homeland could be eroded by displacement resulting from immigration and cultural denigration. "The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of postcolonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention, or a mixture of the two" (p. 9). Hence, Postcolonial literature is mainly concerned with the themes of place and displacement from which the issue of identity crisis emanates as colonization disrupts the colonized object's sense of place and creates identity crisis. They live in a fragmented state which means that the indigenous people are devoid of a unified self. They do not know exactly who they are and to which places they belong because they show the characteristics of both their own cultures and the western culture. For this reason, Bhabha has stated that they are in the 'third space', 'the in-between where "we will find those words with which we can speak of ourselves and others and by exploring this hybridity, this 'Third Space', we may elude the politics of polarity" (in Ashcroft et al, 1995, p. 209). Bhabha argues that there is no pure culture. He wishes to challenge this notion of bounded culture and eventually he is able to remove the duality of self and other. So, Post colonialism has led to the emergence of postcolonial literary theory which has a main goal to investigate the relationship between colonizers and colonized.

## Analysis and Discussion:

In David Malouf's postcolonial novel *Remembering Babylon*, we trace out many appalling and alarming incidents of colonialism and Australians' struggle for survival in white community. Having postcolonial background, Malouf depicts the identity crisis and displacement in the colonized Australia. Moreover, he tells the stories of individuals and their relationship with other members of the society such as friends and neighbors etc.

The story of the novel is set in the mid-nineteenth century in Queensland, Australia. The settler colonies with fences were built separately from the aboriginals because they were afraid of the natives who might assault on them to get their land back. In that settlement, three white children discovered a black figure during their play on the boundary fence. The author very deftly raises the issue of identity through the demarcation between white and black people where white is superior and black is inferior. Initially, the three children feared that he would attack on them with some other black natives but later on they realised that he was alone and white. The name of the boy was Gemmy who had spent half of his life in the streets of the British Isles, and rest of the life living among Aboriginal tribe in the outback of Australia. The term outback refers to the land outside the main urban area. Therefore, his manners and the way of talking reminded them of the natives. Gemmy, the protagonist of the novel, did not easily fit within existing categories of race, culture and nationality. He is the victim of place and displacement which leads towards the crisis of his identity and forces him to be a hybrid person surviving with the two identities or making his third space between the two. The dilemma of identity crisis arises from the beginning of the novel when Gemmy crosses the border that separates the aborigines and the white settlers.

Gemmy was depicted as an unknown creature in the following lines:

The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded water-bird, a brogla, or a human that in the manner of the tales they told one another, all spells and curses, had been changed into a bird, but only halfway, and know, neither one thing nor the other (Malouf, 1994, p. 2).

The depiction of Gemmy as partially a bird and partially a human predicts his in-betweenness because he is white by blood but his brought up with the natives and habits developed over the years have left indelible marks on his personality that has turned him into a hybrid person. While living with Aboriginals, he kept a close supervision on the border that separates the tribe from the white community because he wanted to join with the people of his race. Finally, he decides to cross the border in order to reconstruct his white identity. As he dares to cross the border his life takes a new direction and he becomes an object of suppression and subjugation in the eyes of the white colonizers with their dominant mind set.

Gemmy was first viewed by the three children of McIvor family of British descent, who depict Gemmy as brogla, a large grey Australian crane, a water bird having stick like legs. Here 'Water bird' is used as a metaphor of split identity because a water bird has two different qualities: it can fly in the air and it also belongs to water; so Gemmy is affiliated with two different worlds: aboriginals and western respectively which has displaced him from his rightful place in the society and his identity is the amalgamation of these two civilisations. Karin Devaney Askeland (2008) unfolds Gemmy's inner state of mind who is experiencing severe physical and mental suffering under British colonizers. The reader is invited into the two different worlds which pull and push Gemmy between "Aborigines and the

Europeans, the colonized and the colonizers, the perceived primitive and civilized" (p. 7). Therefore, he is described as 'neither one thing nor the other' which informs the readers that he does not have any strong affinity with any world. His sense of belonging is distorted as he dared to cross the border that separated the two worlds. Ashcroft et al described this tormented identity as "effective identity" (1995, p. 152). The author highlights a boundary marker that physically divided the natives from the settlers which visibly divide the identity of different races. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin elucidate the concept of the border as the construction of tangible and non-tangible "boundaries between peoples, nations and individuals" (2007, p. 25). Under such circumstances, a question arises in the mind of Gemmy that to which place an individual should attach and affiliate himself when no place and people are ready to accept him. These are some complicated questions related to postcolonial identity crisis.

"It was a scarecrow that had somehow caught the spark of life, got down from its pole, and now, in a raggedy, rough-headed way, was stumbling about over the blazing earth, its leathery face scorched black..." (p. 3).

Gemmy is described as a "scarecrow", a creature or an object used to frighten birds so that they could not eat or spoil the crops in the field which usually resembles the mould of a human being. It refers to the crisis of identity of Gemmy who is compared with a scarecrow which is a dehumanized metaphor for an individual. In the same way, the metaphor of "water bird" was used to describe the split identity of Gemmy. With his sunburnt face, he is shown stumbling over the earth to pollute the land of the civilized people with his presence. White people consider Gemmy Farley as a non-human and there is no place for such entity in their community. The whole delineation of Gemmy is delineated with Western

standpoint that imposed strict and rigid rules with the help of their colonial power upon non-western and banned their entry in the land of civilized people. Lamia Tayeb (2012) accentuates the slippery identity of the protagonist who slips out of the identity of a black or a white and secures a third space which is the amalgamation of the both. She viewed Gemmy as “a British revenant, a white child turned Aboriginal man through the physical metamorphosis and cultural and linguistic loss which result from sixteen years spent among Aboriginal tribes. His racial identity contains a subversive, slippery element: by simultaneously occupying both white and black, British and Aborigine identities...” (p. 334). Gemmy’s arrival from the landscape threatens the identity of white settlers community who considers him a native spy. One forceful thing that drives Gemmy to the white settlement was his desire of belonging to his own race. Sixteen years ago he had been shipped onto the Australian shore, and thereafter he had been living with an aboriginal tribe in the new land ever since. But he remains away from aborigines and fails to adopt the practices of aborigine tribe completely. As a child his presence on the continent is described in the following words:

“Lying half in salt, and the warm wash of it, half in air that blistered. Eye led so puffed with light...A spirit, a feeble one, come back from the dead and only half reborn (Malouf, 1994, p. 22).”

The writer has delineated Gemmy’s presence on the shore as a creature whom aborigines too refused to accept in their world initially and he also had a strange attitude towards them and new place. He was presented to be a blank slate who did not accept any cultural norms of the natives but then as an adolescent he rapidly adopted the custom, language, culture and knowledge of the Aboriginal people. Though he accepted the aboriginal traditions, yet he did not fully erase the impression of the previous culture from his

memory. On the other hand, Malouf had penned down the doubtful attitude of the tribe towards the protagonist whom they welcomed “gradually; gradually; in the droll, half-apprehensive way that was proper to an in-between creature” (p. 28). The same reluctance is traced out to welcome Gemmy in the white community. His arrival in the settlement causes bewilderment and he was visited by a group of whites who raised the question “what was he?” (1994, p. 4) just like a group of aborigines questioned him about his whiteness. Lachlan shouts, “A black!...we are being raided by blacks” (p. 2). This was the first thought which came into the mind of a white child. Here Gemmy’s ambivalent position between aboriginal and white community clearly shows the antagonist relationship between colonizers and colonized. In the British settlement, his appearance and manners are considered to be mimicry of white men. Some of them tag him as a treacherous fellow as he spent his childhood with the natives and learnt their language and culture. While living with aborigines, he lost his white complexion because of his exposure to the sunlight and now he is a white man’s burden with his dirty blonde hair. Malouf’s novel presents the different reactions of the white settlers towards Gemmy Fairley and the effects of their actions upon him. He is considered a white man’s parody which is much related to Bhabha’s (1994) concept of mimicry: “Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (p. 86).

Askeland (2008) argues that the settlers control, tame and civilize whatever is unfamiliar to them out of fear of the unknown and they maintain distance from the others who are “the savage and disordered. An example of this is the fear that the settlement shows when Gemmy with his ‘savage’ mentality comes too close to their civilization” (p. 29). Gemmy could not change himself according to the white settlers and he

entered a state of exile and alienation. His position and identity is negated from European and aboriginal tribe alike which makes him an in-between creature. Here we take into consideration Bhabha's notion of hybridity through the interrelations and interdependence between the self and the other. Through the colonial experience, the social categories exerted on the colonized (e.g. the ideas of superior and inferior human races and cultures) imprints an imaginary, which collides with their own, 'displacing' it. This 'encounter' eventually creates new "hybrid" expressions, which in turn challenge the beliefs and experience of the colonizers. Bhabha argues that these colonial and postcolonial cultural systems and statements are constructed in a "liminal space": the "Third Space of Enunciation" (in Ashcroft et al, 1995, p. 209). The whites scarcely recognize Gemmy as a human being. He belongs to both the worlds which clearly draw his hybrid identity. The meeting and mixture of different cultures leads to great identity crisis and fragmentation. The settlers raised the question about his identity, "Could you lose it? Not just language, but it. *It*" (Malouf, 1994, p. 40). He faces the dilemma of his hybrid identity which affects him psychologically as well as physically. His persona is mystery for both blacks and whites (Khan, Afzaal, & Naqvi, 2020; Majeed & Akbar, 2019). The whites only see the loss of familiar superficial western identity in him and question about his whiteness; they do not value the new part of his nature, the knowledge of the land he learnt with the passage of time but only focus on the loss of his western feature. The settlers delineated Gemmy as one of "them", the savage 'other' and poor creature because "It was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and welcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing to them, since at any moment he could show either one face or the other (Malouf, 1994, p. 43). Askeland (2008) defines his condition in the following words: "He is the same as them, but at the same time very different. Gemmy represents

the possibility of loosing their language, civilization, whiteness – '*It*'" (p. 37).

When Gemmy is visited by two blacks, Andy McKillop spread the news in the white community to create resentment among settlers. He told them fiercely, "The bastard was in touch with them. Always had been, secretly, and was now ready to do it openly. In broad daylight!" (Malouf, 1994, p. 95). He misconceives Gemmy and considers him a spy who has illegal relations with the natives and provides information about the community. The white settlers have some kind of fear from the natives that they may raid upon them to expel them from their space so Gemmy's presence plants a seed of fear among the settlers. This episode creates problems for Jock McIvor who protects Gemmy against some of the unkind white settlers. The settlers' colonial attitude towards him clearly indicates their racist thoughts which include the conviction that aborigines are sub-human savages so they should be treated like animals. So, the white community established colonial boundary to keep the dehumanized entities away and to protect themselves. Gemmy feels himself stuck between his aboriginal life and the new life with settlers and becomes the victim of British colonialism. His quest for identity forced him to leave the aborigines where he was viewed as a sea creature, half reborn, a spirit, and a feeble and came to the settler's colony. Here, again he is considered as non-entity or a treacherous person, so he decides to leave the white community also and wash away the forced identity imposed upon him by the colonizers. In this way, he is once again displaced from his place.

## Conclusion

The Postcolonial theory destabilizes the dominant discourses of the West and challenges the inherent assumptions and criticizes the material legacies of colonialism. It focuses particularly on the way in which colonizers distort



the experiences and realities of the colonized people who attempt to reclaim their past and identity in the face of past sufferings and subjugation. David Malouf's novel *Remembering Babylon* is an attempt to highlight the colonial history of Australia, identity crisis, displacement and hybridity. The discourse of the rifts between the two conflicting groups – the white settlers and the Aborigines – also foregrounds the pivotal issues related to indigenous groups living on the outskirts of the modernized world who experience much condemnation and subjugation. The hegemony of the powerful class creates the monopoly of ruling class over the masses, depriving them of their basic right of life. Gemmy is the true portrayal of colonial victimization in the novel. Moreover, through the delineation of different characters, Malouf represents the situation of colonial people and its effects on the lives of community. Gemmy remains a threatening hybrid of self and 'other' to settler and Aboriginal cultures alike. He is considered to be a parody of a white man. Gemmy's presence also affects positively like a catalyst upon the different characters in the novel that develops their identities e.g Janet, Lachlan and Jock but his own life remains tragic. Hence, through the portrayal of different characters, Malouf represents the lives of individuals struggling with displacement and crisis of identity under colonial regime.

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