

## Re-Entering the Pre-Linguistic: A Study of David Malouf's *Remembering*

### *Babylon*

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#### Abstract

Though the dominant critical praxis attempts to locate postcolonial elements in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, the psychological exploration that the novel affords calls for a deeper analysis of the text within the Lacanian framework. Gemmy's borderline existence in the Imaginary, his yearning to find a secure place within the Symbolic, the settlers' disturbing encounter with the unknown, and the documentation of the earliest phase of white Australian history are all principal elements of interest in this literary achievement. What is foregrounded throughout the text is the intricate relation between language and the subject's notion of who he is. Language simultaneously binds the subject to the Symbolic and denies him the idea of a unified self in the Imaginary. In other terms, language leads to the fragmentation of the self through its demand of various subject positions in the Symbolic.

**Key words:** Aborigines, Australia, David Malouf, Imaginary register, Lacan, language, magic realism, Other,

*Remembering Babylon*, Symbolic realm

Though diverse in their narrative style and milieu, both *An Imaginary Life* and *Remembering Babylon* depict the predicament of the central characters who are deprived of language, and cast beyond the Symbolic order. [1] Dislocation in language, as suggested by Bill Ashcroft, foregrounds in

both cases the provisional nature of their selves and the reality constructed by language. [2] In other words, Malouf delineates through these novels, the psychic states of the subjects, who grapple with their desire for the other to attain a unified and whole self. They seek a “reconciliation of psychic divisions,” which, according to Laurie Hergenhan, emerges as a “master theme” in Malouf’s fiction. [3]

In *Remembering Babylon*, located in the mid-nineteenth century Queensland, Malouf revisits the myth of the lost child and brings to light the ordeals of Gemmy Fairley—a twenty nine year old Englishman—that ensue from his strange encounter with the white settlers after his life with the Aborigines for sixteen years. Through the engaging narrative, Malouf explores the psyche of the protagonist who straddles between multiple subject positions and thus traces the very process of subjectivity. The novel captures all the complexities of the human subject who at once wants to identify himself with the Other but is incapacitated by linguistic dislocation. No wonder the book earned some of the highest accolades in the world of fiction which include the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for Fiction in 1994 and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 1996, besides being shortlisted for the 1993 Booker Prize.

It is fragmentation that is most eloquently suggested by the title of the novel. While it evokes the fall of Jerusalem as well as the captivity Israelites in Babylon, it also reminds the reader of, according to Annette Smith, “the Tower of Babel, biblical site of the separation of languages and nations.” [4] These connotations of the title lead us directly to the central issue addressed in the text: the psychological dislocation of the human subject consequent upon his removal from one Symbolic structure to another. The title can also be interpreted in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony or “multi-voicedness” of texts; a polyphonic novel, as Bakhtin points out, focuses on “how the world appears” to the hero as well as “how the hero appears to himself.” [5] The concept is particularly relevant to *Remembering Babylon* as different characters construct the world differently through their languages without forceful narratorial intervention. Gemmy Fairley’s perceptions of the world are at variance with those of other characters like Mr. Frazer and George Abbot. In other terms, it is language that separates and divides these perceptions and this is a re-enactment of the Biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues. Malouf has acknowledged his debt to E. Gregory’s brief account of an actual encounter between a boy named Gemmy Morril and the settlers. Patrick Morgan locates the story “The First Queensland Explorer” in Marcus Clarke’s *Old Tales of a Young Country* (1871) as a likely source of *Remembering Babylon*. [6]

From his very first appearance in the text, Gemmy is depicted as an insubstantial and almost ethereal figure who is designed to reflect the flimsiness of his selfhood. The three children of the settler society who first encounter this figure at the boundary fence are taken aback by the strangeness and the mystery that envelop the intruder. As pointed out by Bill Ashcroft, the fence on which Gemmy perches is itself crucial for the settlers in defining themselves against the unknown. In Ashcroft’s words:

Indeed fences assume almost ritual power of possession in Australian settlement; the fence defines ownership, but at the same time it defines Otherness and alienness. . . . It represents the margin of language and culture but also a way of defining the world. And it is the possible liberation from that way of defining the world which Gemmy represents. [7]

Gemmy is seen “in a shape more like a watery, heat-struck mirage than a thing of substance, elongated and airily indistinct.” Janet and Meg of the McIvor family, and their cousin Lachlan Beattie fear that they are raided by some indigenous group. Their apprehensions are dispelled when Gemmy reveals himself to be a white man through his words, “I am a B-b-british object!”

The disquiet and commotion among the crowd that gathers around the half-naked ‘savage’ reveals how the earliest days of settlement in Australia were steeped in fear of the unknown. Beyond the last fenced paddock lay, “. . . tracts of country that no white man had ever entered. It was disturbing, that: to have unknown country behind you as well as in front. . . . The sense then of being

submerged, of being hidden away in the depths of the country, but also lost, was very strong.” More unnerving than the harsh weather and the rough and unfamiliar terrain is the lurking presence of the natives who encroach their boundaries at night. They shudder to think that just three years ago, the very patch of land they now possess was part of the unknown, and can still hold its mysteries. What ensues is Gemmy’s frantic effort to relate his story through signs and gestures to the eager crowd. The initial suspicion and fear of “the black white man” wanes as they engage in a hilarious guessing game.

Gemmy is finally summoned to the one-roomed schoolhouse where Mr. Frazer, the minister and George Abbot, the nineteen year old schoolmaster elicit further information from him. Gemmy cuts a pathetic figure with scorch marks on his chest and arms, one missing eyebrow, swollen joints, and one twisted and shorter leg. It transpires that sixteen years ago, at the age of thirteen, he was cast overboard from a passing ship and had been living since in the bush with the natives. After several hours’ labour, Mr. Frazer sympathetically develops a “Colonial fairytale” of Gemmy which George Abbot sets down in seven pages. The illiterate Gemmy at first, regards all this as some kind of magic practice. But when he realises that the sheets of paper are a record of his life, he decides to steal them from Mr. Frazer. He feels that with them “the whole of what he was, Gemmy, might come back to him”.

Gemmy’s story can be interpreted as an endless search for a stable ego. How the subject’s dislocation from the Symbolic order engenders fragmentation of the self and threatens his unconscious desire for an ideal and unitary self becomes the focus of the text. Recognition of a stable subject position by the Other being the key to a unitary self, Gemmy’s shifting marginal existence has never been conducive to achieving any notion of a unified self. No phase of his life so far—first, as a little street urchin in London; then a subservient boy in a ship; and finally an “in-between creature” among the Aborigines—has anchored his being to a secure self and identity. Harvey Blume, the American novelist, finds a close parallel between *Remembering Babylon* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. He observes, “Kurtz is the renegade, the one who has abandoned western identity to assume unspeakable powers in an African forest hidden almost entirely from view of Belgium’s river steamers. . . . Malouf presents us with his creature of two worlds, his in-between, nearly at the beginning.” [8]

However, no psychological displacement can totally obliterate the desire for recognition by the Other. In Gemmy’s case, his separate and questionable status and the half-apprehensive acceptance in the new community only deepen this unconscious desire. Lost in the new order, he can only believe that the strange and vague movements in the dark of him “belonged to the life of some creature whose memory he shared, and which rose up at moments to shake him, then let him go.” It is this undefined desire to seek his position in the Symbolic that urges him to approach the settlers after sixteen years. What worries him now is the incomprehensibility of their speech. The crucial role of language for any notion of self is once again foregrounded: “If he could get the words inside him, . . . the creature, or spirit or whatever it was, would come up to the surface of him and take them. It was the words he had to get hold of. It was the words that would recognize him. . . . What he wanted was to be recognized.”

Gemmy’s initial status in Jock McIvor’s family is as marginal as the position he was allowed among the natives. Many of them believe that Gemmy is an infiltrator or a spy who is in league with the natives and is “trading on their goodwill” His stammering fits, native look, and his distortion of English words make him a mere “parody of a white man.” What Malouf provides here is a vivid account of Gemmy’s efforts to be inserted into the order and the settler’s insistence on regarding him as the other. In Malouf’s words, “It was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing to them . . .”

As the settlers’ language and their unspoken signs become more trackable, Gemmy realises the unfeasibility of his own project. Identifying oneself with an order involves one’s deepest affinities and affiliations. That he refuses to divulge the whereabouts of the natives signifies his position: “. . . and when he was forced to speak at last, put them off with answers which, by shifting a landmark and

counting a few dead in with the living, set his people further north than they actually were and made them more numerous. He felt a heavy responsibility.” The notions and beliefs that Gemmy has imbibed from the natives remain powerful within him. During their botanical expeditions into the country he conceals from Mr. Frazer everything that is forbidden—plants that shall not be touched and names not to be uttered. Mr. Frazer’s insistence on recording these names is highly suggestive of the crucial role that language plays in inscribing and structuring meaning. Gemmy’s in-between status and his inner struggle are further revealed during these moments.

The vague fears and objections of the settlers aroused by Gemmy’s presence solidify into firm opposition when two natives seek out Gemmy after almost a year. The settlers seize the opportunity to instigate strong antagonism against Gemmy and even invent a story that the visitors have passed him a stone with supernatural powers. The guns the settlers carry with them fail to offer them any sense of security against their inexplicable fear. Malouf seems to suggest through their fears that a sense of security and belonging to a “place” is as vital as any other aspect to ensure a firm identity and selfhood. Gemmy thus becomes to the settlers, a constant reminder of the lurking yet undefined dangers and the fearful loneliness “in the immensities of the land” He is unable to snap the strings that tie him to the structure he desires to quit. Nor does he succeed in binding himself to the new order wherein he seeks a stable self. Gemmy thus remains suspended in this uncertainty by the open hostility of a few like Andy McKillop and the alarmed surveillance of the whole community. He is rendered incapable of fitting himself anywhere to remain as a whole self.

The natives’ attempt to reclaim Gemmy only serves to jeopardize his position further. The chief object of their visit is to replenish him with the spirit of their land. As depicted in the text, “The land up there was his mother, the only one he had ever known. It belonged to him as he did to it . . . and not just for his lifetime either but for the whole of time, since it was for the whole of time that it existed, as he did too so long as he was one with it.” This, in fact, is the crux of the Aborigines’ mythological concept of land and creation referred to as “Dreaming.” Admiring the virtues of the Australian Aboriginal life such as “their egalitarian social and political structure, far-flung trading networks and above all their rich spiritual and cultural life, Stuart Macintyre agrees with the celebrated French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in describing them as “intellectual aristocrats.” [9]

Malouf, thus once again, places his protagonist in the vortex of a psychic conflict. This conflictual experience in the unconscious is captured through a series of fearful dreams. He sees himself being shoved back and forth by two leering white men who then get him hoped about with their arms. While he lets out fierce howls of pain, the tormentors choke him with a bag and drag him over stones. Now he feels his head repeatedly thrust under water while the darkness in the bag turns into mud. He is released only when a voice rises in protest which he recognises to be Jock McIvor’s. Significantly, when Gemmy Fairley is denied entry into the Symbolic order and consequently dislodged from a stable subject position, he seeks wholeness of self, like Ovid, in the Lacanian Imaginary. Gemmy helps Mr. Frazer imbibe the spirit of oneness with the outer world, “*We have been wrong to see this continent as hostile and infelicitous.*” The italicization of these thoughts of the minister implies that his realisation occurs beyond the boundaries of the Symbolic. The italicized words are meant to capture the impressions in the unconscious of the character. They are not to be regarded as acts of communication.

Transient flights into the Imaginary where the ego momentarily loses its distinction and dissolves in the other are a crucial experience in the lives of many Maloufian characters. Jim Saddler in *Fly Away Peter* “becomes” the bird in an evanescent moment of apprehension just as Ovid in *An Imaginary Life* “sways and ripples” and turns into the landscape. It is such a moment that descends upon Janet, McIvor’s daughter, when she works with Mrs. Hutchence in her beehives. Malouf describes her experience of being covered all over her by a whole swarm of bees, brought by a sudden gust of wind: “. . . the swarm was on her, thickening so fast about her that it was as if night had fallen, just like that, in a single cloud. . . . she was blazingly gathered into the single sound they made, the single mind. Her own mind closed in her.” She miraculously loses her separateness and feels that it is her own body that is making the din. It makes no difference “whether she was a girl or

a tree.” She owes her lifelong devotion to bees “to this moment, under the trees, when her mind had for a moment been their unbodied one and she had been drawn into the process and mystery of things.”

Depiction of such unrealistic scenes and epiphanic experiences in Malouf’s texts can be interpreted as instances of magic realism. The two contradictory modes of representation, viz. realism and the fantastic are juxtaposed in the narrative which results in the subversion of the realistic elements. In the words of Stuart Sim, “the realistic elements of the text are continually being undercut by the intrusion of impossible or inexplicable events.” [10] Magic realism becomes a site for the confluence of the Imaginary and the Symbolic in the psychic experience of the subject. The deft blending of realistic scenes and “Imaginary” experiences disrupts our secure assumptions and offers a rare degree of psychological realism.

Malouf’s texts reiterate the fact that reliving a traumatic past through reminiscence evoked by present associations has a therapeutic effect on the human subject. Vestiges of unresolved experiences in the dark recesses of the mind resurface into consciousness through memory leading to new realizations and the purgation of disturbing emotions. Gemmy too is enabled to recapture the hazy and chaotic experiences of his deprived childhood in a flow of memories, the meaning of which had always eluded his consciousness. He remembers with a shudder how, at the age of five or six, he, with other starving orphans, swept sawdust under the screaming machines in a timber mill. This was succeeded by more cruel days when Gemmy became “Willett’s Boy,” the rat-catcher, who even provided the name “Gemmy.” Exasperated with Willett’s frequent thrashing and wounds from rat bites, the eleven year old boy sets ablaze Willett’s dwelling at night, probably killing his drunken master. The alarmed flight of the boy eventually takes him to his life at sea for two years. The London urchin thus reaches the shores of Australia to start his life with the natives, when he is thrown overboard during a serious illness. These visions of his past life have a profound impact on Gemmy’s mind. He comes to the awful realization that he will never be recognized as a British subject by the settler society. All these experiences bring about a debilitating effect on his notion of selfhood.

Gemmy is now ruled by the unconscious feeling that the only way to forestall further disintegration of his mind is to rejoin his native community. It is a tragic acceptance of his failure to secure his rightful position in the Symbolic, which leaves his fragile self floundering in its labyrinthine network of meanings. In his discomposure he believes that he can detach himself from the order by possessing those seven sheets of paper on which was set down his life, nearly a year ago, by Mr. Frazer and the schoolmaster. What Gemmy actually secures from George Abbot are mere exercise sheets of students. The fate that awaited Gemmy is retold, only after fifty years, by Janet, now Sister Monica, absorbed in the secluded life of the convent. Lachlan had unearthed the details of Gemmy’s death. Three years after his disappearance, Gemmy joined a different clan whose eight members including him, were slaughtered by troopers during a “dispersal.” Among the bones of the victims, preserved by the clan near a remote waterhole, lay those of Gemmy.

Gemmy is simultaneously silenced of his native tongue and denied access to the settlers’ language through isolation. In other terms, he is incapacitated to gain any recognition or assume any substantial role in the Symbolic. He languishes in his desire for recognition. As Alice Truax points out, “The desire to be recognized and remembered is always close to the heart of Malouf’s work—whether he is writing about a prisoner of war in southeast Asia or a lonely Roman poet. And for these yearning characters, language often defines the boundaries of their imagined worlds. [11] The decisive role of language in the constitution of the subject, as postulated by Lacan, is again underscored through Gemmy’s tale. The linguistic dislocation that Gemmy is subjected to jeopardizes his sense of self and identity. It is this uncertain and in-between status of the protagonist that is so emphatically portrayed in the novel. The picture of Gemmy hanging precariously on the rails of the fence is a symbolic projection of his indefinite positioning at the borderline where intersect the two orders—both known and unknown to him. By being disabled to use language, Gemmy is rendered a misfit in the Symbolic, and psychologically, he is relegated to the stage of a child in the pre-linguistic. Malouf thus powerfully depicts how subjects dislodged from the Symbolic seek refuge in the pre-

linguistic stage of the child, in the Imaginary. He once again foregrounds the Lacanian notion that selfhood is contingent upon the Other's recognition through language.

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