Colonial Politics and Problem of Language in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*

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Abstract

Language plays a critical role in postcolonial literature. English has been the dominant language of European imperialism that carried the European culture to the different colonies across the world. Australia is the settled countries where English has become not only the official and mainstream language of the country but has also put the indigenous languages on the verge of extinction.

David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* is a postcolonial text that re-imagines the colonial history of Australian settlement presenting the early socio- cultural and linguistic clashes between the settlers and the Aboriginals. The present paper tries to analyze the various dimensions of language envisioning its micro to macro impacts on the individual, community and nation as well. British used English language as the weapon of spreading European culture in Australia causing the systematic replacement of local dialects and other vernacular languages; hence the issues of linguistic and cultural identities would also be among the focal points of the discussion. The paper also attempts to examine how David Malouf provides a solution by preferring and appropriating native languages and culture for the future ofs Australia.

Key Words: ***Language, Imperialism, Colony, Settlement, Postcolonial and Aboriginals.***

Language poses a central question in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*. He discusses the colonial use of language to protect as well as to spread the culture of the colonizers in foreign land. Though the title of the novel carries a historical theme of the mass exodus of Europeans to New South Wales, one of the pivot issues of the novel is the power of 'English' as colonial language to encroach the Aboriginal land and to dominate native culture and language. The story focuses on various dimensions of language envisioning its micro to macro impacts on the individual, community and nation as well. The British use English language as the weapon of spreading European culture in Australia causing the systematic replacement of local dialects and other vernacular languages. Written in 1990, the novel takes the readers to the nineteenth century where the process of Australian settlement is on full swing and colonial politics of the British seemingly turns out to be the executor of the futuristic use of the continent foreseeing its economic and political purposes. The novel principally deals with the feeling of estrangement a person can feel when he/she is completely isolated or separated from his culture, language and land of origin. The novel centers around a legitimate question on the limitations of culture and language and their use both for protecting and restricting individual's natural capability to be fitted and comprehensive for foreign land and culture. Similarly, it raises the issue how a community, culture or power politics bring a man to a complete estrangement towards his own community. The novel opens in Queensland of the mid nineteenth century where three children of commonwealth settlers are playing on the ground confront with a stranger who appears sitting balanced upon a fence. Their minds are already saturated with the stories of the Aboriginals told to them by their elders as the uncivilized and subhuman who live in Australian wilderness. They immediately react and take him into their custody by pretending a long stick which is actually a rifle. The children belong to the Scottish family migrated to Australia. The children are Lachlan and his cousins, Janet and Meg who later come to know that the man is in fact a European, though he speaks and behaves like an Aboriginal. The strange man is later identified as Gemmy Fairley who was over thrown from ship when he was being transported to Australia. He had washed up on the Australian shore, nearly half dead and

uncertain of where he was. He was saved and brought up by a wandering group of Australian Aboriginal and after sixteen years he renters the white settlement from where the story actually starts. His re-entry into his culture and community makes the settlers panicked and disturbed. His long stay among the natives provides him an opportunity to understand native language and he learns the art of living in the wild. Mr. Frazer, the town's minister and botanist, uses the experience of Gemmy and writes the name and use of native vegetation. Later Gemmy feels that he is being used by the people of his own community and culture and decides to go to live among the Aboriginals forever.

The postcolonial stance of *An Imaginary Life* can be analyzed in context of Malouf's treatment of European transplanted culture in the land of Australia. In the entire story language apparently functions as the vehicle of transporting cultural values from one culture to another. In this context language can be argued as the central theme in the novel as Gemmy Fairley, who represents both cultures with the help of language, finds English language and culture dominating and stifling and adopts Aboriginality forever. The process of Gemmy's transformation can be classified into three stages. Firstly, he is born in England and his mother tongue is English. English language symbolizes power and he is the part of the powerful linguistic background. But it is the colonial politics of his own people, culture or society that exiles him to Australia. The second phase of his life starts when he enters the Aboriginal's community in Australia. Here, his powerful linguistic background fails to protect him and he survives by learning Aboriginal language. His entry into Aboriginal world through the medium of native language gives him entirely different perspective of Australia. He learns the spiritual values of living with nature that was totally opposite to the material based culture and language of the Western world. In this phase native language opens his ways to get close to the nature and the concept of superior culture and language is deconstructed by the novelist. Language is seen as a representative of culture, and when Gemmy prefers native language than the colonial English the distinction between civilized and uncivilized or superior culture and inferior culture collapses. In third stage Gemmy returns to his roots and rejoins the white community in Queensland after spending sixteen years among the Aboriginals. In this phase he declares himself as the "object" of British culture where English language saves his life.

Language and culture are always analyzed compensatory to each other. In case of Australian colonization English language played a significant role in transplanting European culture to Australian continent. The entire process of Australian settlement, before and after its federation as nation in 1901, was focused on to establish British culture's roots in Australia and to manifest the Anglo-Celtic identity of newly developed nation determining the myth of the purity of white race. In order to practice the racially theorized concept of Australian settlement the Australian government not only discontinued the entry of the Asians and other non whites in Australia, for some time, but also evicted the Aboriginals from their right to culture and land. According to Manning Clark, "What the British or European observed in the Australians was their Britishness" (184). Spread of British language and culture in Australian continent can be understood with the argument of Ngugi who points out that language and culture are inseparable, and that therefore the loss of the former results in the loss of the latter:

> *The language as communication and as culture are then products of each other … Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world … the language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world (Ngugi 15-16).*

Remembering Babylon brings out the theme of the loss of language and its culture connections. Culture and language are portrayed in connection to huge exodus of mass, community and individual. All the characters seem either struggling for protecting their culture and language or scared of native ways of living. In the beginning of the novel the new settlers are seen spreading their culture in Australia and role of English language can be analyzed more dominating. When Gemmy confronts with the European children after sixteen years exile the children could not imagine a man of other culture, particularly native black, in their colony. Except Gemmy Fairley the white settlers in the novels feel sense of alienation and afraid of losing their language and cultural identity. They are presented as the exiled people of England in Australia. Their existence is portrayed hollow and empty if they lose the fundamentals of their culture and language. They do not feel as Australians and most of the towns and streets are nameless. Gemmy describes that:

> *The land to the south was also unknown. The settlement up here proceeded in frog-leaps from one little coastal place to the next. Between 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 (7)*

The white settlers appear haunted in unknown land and afraid of their uncertain future. Many characters feel insecure in the unknown land, "child's murmuring out of sleep might keep it human for a moment" (8). Thus, the settlers' self is alienated from their roots of culture as Ashcroft et al. state in, *The Empire Writes Back*, that, "A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or ´voluntary` removal for indentured labor (9). This is the reason why the new settlers are insecure in the novel. Malouf presents them as the object of British culture and language. The crux of the novel centers around the dialogue of Gemmy Fairley when he argues before the new settlers, "Do not shoot, it shouted. 'I am a B-b-british object" (3). Here language appears as the hall of mark of any culture that can save as well as bind a person with fixed social norms and traditions.

The novel equally discusses the language and culture of the Aboriginals. When Gemmy Fairley is thrown out by his own people it is a community of Aboriginal that saves and protects him. Their culture is presented very peaceful and humanity based where a person from outside world is neither colonized nor dominated. They understand the requirement of Gemmy Fairley and treat him accordingly. The universality of using verbal and non verbal language help Gemmy survive in the wild. Later in the story when Gemmy returns to the while settlement after learning the Aboriginal language and ways of living he becomes the source of knowledge for Mr. Frazer and school master to learn native language and culture. When Mr. Frazer starts identifying and naming the native vegetation, Gemmy becomes frightened and irrelative "since the word Mr. Frazer had hit upon was one the surrounding spirits should never have heard on a man's lips"(67). He has spiritual or internal understanding of native plants and feels worried the way Mr. Frazer uses English language to replace the native one. Gemmy's internal consciousness of Aboriginal culture and language rejects the colonial method adopted by Mr. Frazer to name the native plants in his diary. Interestingly, Mr. Frazer writes the name of the creator in connection with the land and says "God's bounty and his intention to provide for his children. He is a gardener and everything he makes is a garden"(130). Later, Mr. Frazer himself understands the need of changing colonial ways to understand and live native land and culture.

The novel reminds the existence of human language in Australia for more than 40,000 years where the Aboriginals of Australia, with their long occupancy of land, developed one of the richest oral literatures of the world. The Aboriginals had no common language; hence, their songs, chants, legends and stories were enormously diverse. Much of the oral literature portrays the mythical time of the making of the sun, the earth and the moon, origin of humans on the land and the making of tree, birds and animals. It also "concerns with the right relationships that human beings must have with the land; its creatures, relatives and others in the clan and the spirits…" (Goodwin 8). On other hand written language was introduced in Australia merely 200 years ago, in 1788, by the white settlers for colonial purposes of England. "A colony, penal or otherwise, immediately establishes a tension between the introduced culture, with its language, law, education and scale of values and the indigenous qualities of the land that is settled and its existing inhabitants" (Goodwin 1). David Malouf depicts Aboriginal culture peaceful and eco-friendly that cannot be understood without going deep into it. The oral language of the Aboriginals teaches Gemmy the value of nature and silence. He learns the silent language of fauna and flora of the landscapes. Through this silent language Gemmy feels that there is someone or something in the world that cares him. Aboriginal oral language develops in him a universal concept of humanity and now he belongs to land, culture, vegetation and everything that in totality is Australia:

> *He could recognize and perceive the signs and messages of the landscape and knew about its plants and animals, and their holy spirit to reconstruct an optimistic future for Australia which drawn by the botanist, Mr. Frazer, based on friendship and loyalty (Bliss 731).*

The novel depicts Malouf's vision of language and its connection with nature and landscapes. He himself states that his concept of language does not limit up to its use in communication through sounds of words but its other forms:

> *One of the things I am interested in is the different forms of language.*

> *It's not just the forms of actual speech: dialect language, the five or seven Aboriginal languages that Gemmy speaks, which we never hear. But there is another kind of language which is the one I'm more interested in, and that is the language of gesture or the language of silence that doesn't require words. Often in my books, and I suppose especially in this one, when most is happening nothing is actually being said, or not in words anyway (Papastergiadis, 90-91).*

The novel strongly raises the issue of language and identity. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks,* has explicitly raised the internal and external issues of the connections of language with identity:

> *Language and identity are intertwined. Language does not exist in a void. All language systems are anchored in a much broader concept. When a people face colonization, both their identity and language are being challenged. Derrida introduces the notion of disorder of identity (14)*

There are several efficacies of colonization on linguistic identity of the natives in postcolonial literature. In Australian literature language has many fold connections with various languages spoken in Postcolonial Australia. English has been the dominating colonial language in determining the pre-colonial as well as postcolonial identities of Australia. The oldest oral languages of the continent are still recognized as the real identity of Australia but they are spoken less and are on the verge of extinction. The oral languages have no written scripts so they are not used to portray the indigenous issues of twenty first century. Even the Aboriginal writers write in English so that there issues could be gazed at international level. David Malouf significantly depicts linguistic connections with Australian identity. He prefers both English as well as oral languages of the continent to make the real identity of Australia. In *Remembering Babylon* he creates his vision of Australian identity that could be possessed after complete immersion with the natural world of the continent. Gemmy Fairley's character is the rare example of Australian which is based on the postcolonial concept of hybrid identity. His character is the symbolical embodiment of futuristic Australian identity that has been built on the premises of the phenomenon of linguistics. English language with its imperial identification appears as an aggressive and carrier of colonial mind set where as the native oral language is portrayed as non aggressive and peaceful. His native ways of communication make him less spoken person. His silence articulation of broken English arouses suspicion among the settlers. Since language is one of the strongest evidence to prove one's identity, Gemmy's deformed language could not define his identity. In this context Nikos Papastergiadis states:

> *What is lost is not just the fact that he is mute; what is lost also is the whole world as if exists in all the names in all the languages that we give it. That particular world in that language with those particular names is in his head and nowhere else, and when he's it will disappear forever. (92)*

Gemmy's silence and irregular sentences are inadequate to express his emotions and feelings about his language and culture. But the settlers have no other way to recognize Gemmy than his skin complexion and spoken language. They are equally bewildered and confused about Gemmy. Gemmy's inadequacy of expressing his feelings in his own language is the most traumatic phase of his life. Malouf describes the pain and predicament of people who understand and know their language of origin but due to long exile or displacement forget the basics syntax and pronunciation. Gemmy Fairley passes through the similar condition where his life appears as fish that tries to live without water. He tries a lot but his feelings do not come out of his mouth with appropriate sounds that signify the specific objects of British culture. Malouf expresses his helplessness of speaking with his own people in own language.

In order prove him as the part of British culture he repeats these meaningless utterances "don't you, eh? Eh? Ah'm the wan" (6). He tries to speak but does not get success. He puts hard efforts for articulation "he banged his head with the flat of his hand and " H-h-head" he hooted", (14); "Nose`` he yelled" (14), " Arm! M-m-mouth! Ear!" (14). His loss of language brings him on the verge of destruction. And he feels, "the others had let him down" (15). Frantz Fanon says that, "a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and

implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power" (18). Malouf's vision of language can be analyzed in respect to the regular use of language and the availability of socio-cultural environment. Gemmy's life in Landon was not easy as he was an orphan boy brought up by a Mr. Willy, a rat catcher. So he had no knowledge of writing and reading of English. Later when he happens to be with the Aboriginals he has to learn the native language for survival in wild Australia. He lives among them consistently for sixteen years and the environment fixes his pronunciation according to the sound system of the oral language of the continent. In this way his personality emerges as a hybrid that might be a bridge for connecting to opposite cultures, European and Australian.

Being a hybrid Gemmy on the one hand becomes the resource person for the new settlers and danger for losing the white culture and language on the other. Later this happen to all the immigrants to Australia whose culture and linguistic structure changed accordingly as Helen, et al state in *Post Colonial Drama*, "migration commonly involves linguistic displacements as well as physical and cultural dislocations" (173). Mr. Frazer and, the amateur botanist and George Abbot, the school master, decide to pen down Gemmy's life story with the point of view of white culture. They try to judge his identity with the similar white perspectives. They consistently interview him and always try to search something in his silence. They candidly connect the episodes of past event conjecture his identity, "he would have liked to break through the silence that kept Gemmy apart them" (179). Mr. Frazer is willing to analyze the marks of his body and the eyebrows and all the time he appears "merely dumb" (180). Mr. Frazer analyzes Gemmy's body language and declares that his long time among the Aboriginals has changed his identity. He imitates his facial expressions and gestures which were different from a white man's body language and other expressions of communications. The most important attribute of Gemmy's life floats to the surface during Mr. Frazer and George Abbot's analysis of his identity is the 'silence' which Gemmy uses as the medium of communication. He has learned the use of silence from the Aboriginals as the powerful medium of communication which cannot be understood with the western perspectives of linguistics. However, his silence brings him to be declared non white or black by Mr. Frazer and George Abbot. His silence can be analyzed as:

> *Silence can be more active than passive, especially on stage where a silent character still speaks the languages of the body and of space. Here, silence enacts more than a problematic absence of voice; rather it is a discourse in its own right and a form of communication with its own denunciative effects (Helen, 189-90).*

The novel equally reflects the significance of written form of language highlighting its cultural and linguistic value. In the entire process of colonization the written form of language plays a central role in mapping and identifying world's unchartered and undiscovered territories of the world. Witten language embodies the advancement of a culture declaring it more civilized than the people who don't read and write. In this context the thousand years old vernacular dialects or oral languages of the Aboriginals were inferiors and uncivilized for the colonizers. Gemmy neither can write nor understands the relevance of writing on the piece of paper. His British identity requires the knowledge of reading and writings from him. For the new settlers a person having complete ignorance for reading and writing is uncivilized and primitive. Thus he becomes a medium of amusement for them.

Similarly, Gemmy's identity is questioned on the basis of language when he is repeatedly fails to generate words for the objects he has lived in Landon. He feels hesitated and insulted when he fails to correlate words with the objects, "he would see it clearly enough, feel his hand clasping the handle of the jug or smell the darkstained leather, but no word was connected to them"(27). He cannot name objects, and fails to find words for things, "b-b-boots, j-j-jug" (27). But it does not mean that the objects of his old life were deleted from the layers of his consciousness but they keep floating in his mind. He has no power to express them which proves most torturous thing for him.

The novel castes light on his life among the Aboriginals and the problems he faced due to his linguistic and cultural background. The process of losing and gaining languages puts him into myriad of troubles and he begins doubting his own 'self' whether human or not, "…he was a tormented spirit" (28). He lives indigenous life in Australian wild he passes through the similar plight of not being completely included with natives as his identity is doubted by the people whom he really belongs to. Everywhere Gemmy

thinks that the speaking of words with some particular songs would solve his problem of not being included. "…it was the words he had to get hold of. It was the words that would recognize him" (32). It is the less understanding of words of that makes him maltreated in the Aboriginal camp where he feels 'other'.

Symbolic communication in the novel is one of the other paramount features of the novel that represents the attribute of oral language and connects Gemmy with the native landscapes. In another episode of the novel Barney Manson's assistant Andy Mckillop closely observes all the activities of Gemmy who is working on a shed and two natives come and sit with him. Andy Mckillop sees the Aboriginals giving a thing like stone to Gemmy. He does not speak and understand native language but only guesses that the mysterious thing like stone might be harmful for the settlement, "I saw them give him something"(101), "a stone"(101). This episode reveals the widened gap between two cultures where language plays a pivotal role. Gemmy who represents the Aboriginal culture and language has spiritual premises having less concern with material object. However, the material based western culture is represented by Mr. Barney and Andy whose colonial attitude of suspicion and property accumulation etc. is carry forwarded by the power of English language. Commenting on the 'stone' episode of the novel Alice Brittan remarks that there was a huge gap in British linguistic structure to translate the symbolical meaning of 'stone' in the novel.

The colonizers fail to understand the spiritually symbolized meaning of 'stone' and blame a person, Gemmy Fairly, who is the only mediator of bringing two opposite cultures together. The colonial ideology has taught them to be suspicious of anything that appears on the way of the strategic expansion of British Empire in the continent. They can question Gemmy's existence in the settlement but can never understand his oral and verbal expressions that carry huge treasure of life in Australia.

McIvor family represents the minor groups living in the colony. This is Scottish family who feel marginalized among the English. Their nostalgia and craving for the people of Scottish accent reflects their love for Scotland and native language. Jane and her sister feel delighted when join them, the two girls were delighted. Their mother tells them that their cousin is coming from Scotland. "When their mother announced that a cousin was about to come out and join them, the two girls were delighted. Kin at last a boy! From Scotland, from home"(48). Even they speak English what love to be identified Scottish. They are growing in Australia with Scottish background of their family and keen to listen to all the cultural and ethnic stories of homeland from their parents.

Gemmy's experience of life of wild Australia provides him the natural ways of communication from where he learns the universality of love for humanity and nature. He has perfectly learned to communicate with nature. In this context in exile he, "lost his language in the new one that came to his lips" (24), but in same time exile offers him opportunity to get out of the narrow boundaries of material culture developed by his fellow humans. As an orphan child of Landon he had faced the exploitive nature of industrial and capital based culture where labor class, children and women were prone to be used for wealth accumulation and the comfort of the elite class of the society. "He did not want to be taken back" (29) to the white settlement but, "What he wanted was to be recognized" (29). But at this point language of white settlers appears failure to acknowledge the universality of the oral languages of Australia whom Gemmy represents by and large. The characters whose eyes are blindfolded with colonial mind set do not try to decode what he wants to communicate but only worried about his white identity. The McIvor family who develops communication with Gemmy learns the mystery of living a peaceful life in Australia. For them Gemmy is not "infiltrator", or "spy" (34).

Janet and Lachlan learn to decode the sounds used by Gemmy and develop communication with him. Their closeness with Gemmy opens myriad of opportunities for living in Australia. Unlike the other settlers they communication with Gemmy, "No, no, Gemmy dear, let me do it,' she would say when he failed to button his shirt straight. Or, laughing at the way his hair stuck out in quills and would not be disciplined…(32). They learn to distinguish the native plants and Lachlan learns tracking from Gemmy, "Making distinction between them which he had learned among the blacks, he taught Lachlan to track. (29). Gemmy knows the language and knowledge of the continent that attracts many characters in the novel transform themselves opening new ways for making future of Australia as multicultural and multilingual democratic country. This all happen with the human efforts of finding possibilities of understanding each other's language and culture. It is the result of native language and communication of Gemmy with the children of settlers that seeds of the new Australian identity begin to be sprouted. This communication has a great impact on Janet to transform her 'self' to be a new Australian. She represents a new Australia by her transcendence understanding, "all breeds and crossbreeds, and create one or two new ones-actually

bring them into being, whole swarms that the earth had never known till she called them" (143). Penelope Ingram states that, for Malouf, non-indigenous Australians must learn from indigenous Australians how get in touch with the spirit of the land.… Such an act will function to both heal white Australia's own crisis of identity and pave the way for a true reconciliation with Aboriginal people (165). Then she said "I have never seen anyone clearer in all my life" (194).

As a matter of fact, the white settlers should not be blind more, instead they should read human nature and the soul of the Aborigines rather than keeping on the categories of the super white. They should think like Janet to understand Gemmy who was a good fellow and intelligent enough to show them the value of the land. At the end of the novel, Janet remembered Gemmy as a successful fellow "never to fall" (199). Gemmy entered into their unconscious, into the life of the settlers to teach them how to love humanity and to give up their barbarous treatment to the others, which have torn up the community into conflicts, wars, violation of human rights. According to John Thieme, "the novel ends with a vision of transcendental unity, in which Gemmy is seen as the agent of a universal love that puts ′the vast continent … in touch now with its other life" (35). Gemmy Fairley is treated as 'other' because of being a black Aboriginal, and a white boy without English language. In fact, Gemmy was there to convey them a message about the creation of the wonders of the landscape, to transcend their imagination to bring about a new model of thought like bees in their hives "which were not of the usual sort but of glass so that an observer could see through to all that was going on in them, all the events and organized procedures and rituals of another life"(191). And here, Gemmy tried to unite them with the moral doctrine of the landscape, which is a kind of a powerful religion. Although Gemmy was expelled among them, suffered and victimized by the grotesque racism, like ancient prophets who suffered for the sake of their grandeur message, Gemmy was able to transform them to real human beings like Janet, Lachlan and Jock McIvor to become nucleus for hybrid identity of new Australia which is prosperous and defiant to the aggressive and racist identity of the super whites of colonialists who created long suffering hells for humanity. Thus, Gemmy's 'otherness' was triumphant, not a failure in the settlement. He was innocent, not evil and had good qualities. If he could not speak proper English, it means, he should not be excluded from humanity.

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