

# Appropriating the Postcolonial Discourse – A Critical Analysis of David Malouf’s Selected Works

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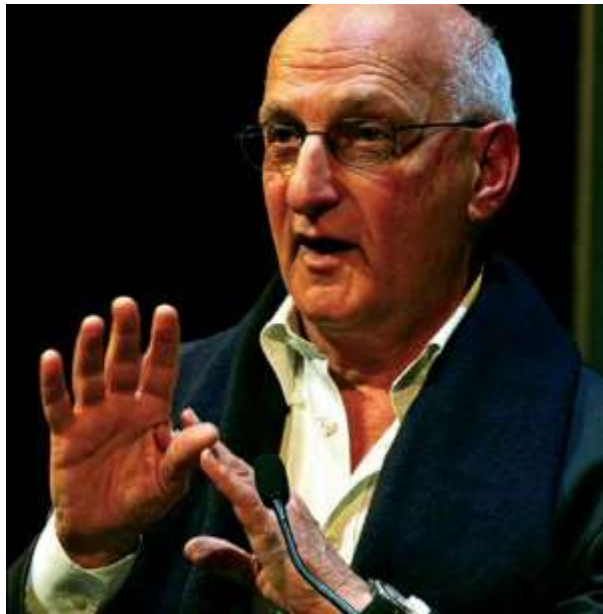
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Courtesy: <http://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/article/12698-beyond-the-book-fest/>

## Politics and Literature

The relation between politics and literature is a contentious debate. Literature at times bypasses the domain of politics, but at times a literary work that seems autonomous on close scrutiny becomes much paradoxical. The author at times uses this medium to suit his designs, and occasionally can become a mere puppet under the pressure of discursive practices, and something comes out of his pen that he had not initially intended. This intricate relation has assumed serious dimensions especially after the outburst of recent critical theories like New Historicism and Postcolonial Studies.

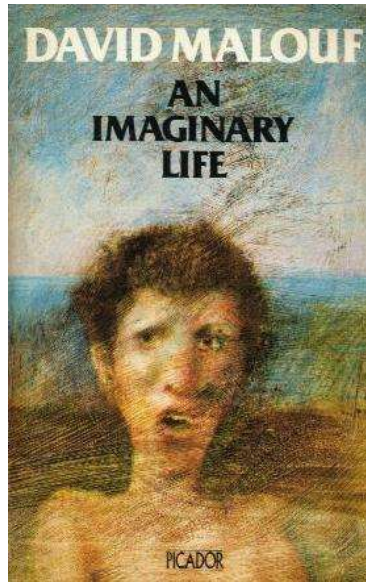
## Focus of This Paper

My intention in this paper is to trace such political underpinnings that pervade the fiction of Australian writer David Malouf. Australia being a settler colony has come under literary discussions frequently, especially because it has produced such rich literary giants that claim to be belonging to the rubric of postcolonialism like David Malouf, Patrick White, etc., but the question that arises here is whether Malouf fits the bill accurately.

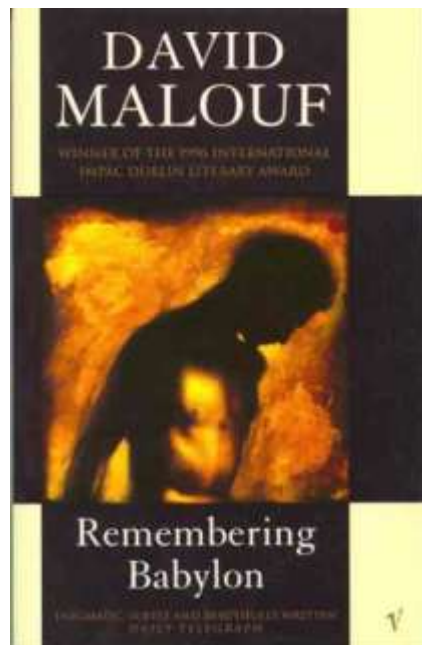
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Appropriating the Postcolonial Discourse – A Critical Analysis of David Malouf’s Fiction



David Malouf's first novel, *Johnno*, was published in 1975. He is especially known for his 1978 novel, *An Imaginary Life* and the internationally acclaimed *Remembering Babylon*.



### **Uniqueness of Malouf's Fiction**

The question that arises here is what makes Malouf's fiction unique? The answer obviously is that he is not deeply nostalgic about the homeland, rather he uses his imagination to come to realistic terms and lets it act as a bridge between the past and present. He is conscious of the fact that what is at hand is more important than permanently living in an identity-crisis phase. He is deeply a pragmatist who uses art as a tool to bridge the gulf between the past and present

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rather than creating a dangerous desire that is hard to be materialized. He realizes the sublimating powers of fiction that can harness the haunted memories of the past in realizing a better future.

The way Malouf arranges his plots overtly make them less political, but there is an implicit touch of his anti-colonial stance but not a radical one like that of Chinua Achebe, Rushdie and others. It is generally believed that Aboriginal Australians can realistically write against the Eurocentric norms and not the settlers like Malouf, whose fiction is much the product of his personal vendetta.

### **Core Conviction**

Malouf's core conviction is that fiction has the magical ability to convert the commonplace reality into something that can be idyllic. He primarily tends to use his faculty of imagination to fulfill his political motives. His political imperatives are not loaded with hatred, but with a positive conviction that what is on hand is far better than dreaming of something that cannot be retrieved. The way he assimilates in the Australian landscape, its history, identity and language is undoubtedly magical, but how far it can represent the true dissent? Why such a stance is opted by Malouf? His dazzling literary display is witness to this stance, where he confirms to the current status quo.

### ***An Imaginary Life***

*An Imaginary Life*, Malouf's second novel, is an exquisite account of Malouf's personal experiences. Malouf has the knack of manipulating the material already known to the readers in an innovative way that serves both his political motives as well as artistic goals.

Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, now a (post) colonial classic, retells the story of the Roman poet Ovid's exile. The poet is exiled from the center of civilization (Roman Empire) at that time, and thus is compelled to live in a world near the sea Tomis where the landscape, the language, the people all is alien to him. Finally, with the help of a wild boy, Ovid comes to accept his new surroundings. Ovid's so-called civilized nature makes it difficult for him to be open to the different languages and silences of Nature until he is taught by the wild boy, thereby the self/other dichotomy is neutralized.

In a brilliant anonymous essay "What is the literary function of the dialogue between language and nature in David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*", this fact is deliberated and the conviction formed is that, "In order for Malouf to create this new communion between self and world, he first disconnects both Ovid and readers from their known language . . . We have to be estranged from the language of civilization before we can learn the dialogue of nature".

Malouf stresses upon this function of language because he knows the fact that language is more than simply a means of communication; it constitutes our world-view by cutting up and ordering reality into meaningful units. The meanings we attach to things tell us which values we

consider superior or inferior. Thus he deconstructs the very nature of language and lets Ovid undergo retrogressive metamorphosis to overcome the feelings of nostalgia. In Laura E. Savu's opinion "In this novel the very notion of "home" is redefined by Malouf as a demystified way of seeing the world—a condition in which man's natural, aesthetic, and moral states are harmoniously integrated—rather than an actual, known/remembered place".

### **Ultimate Assimilation and Political Significance**

The fact that Ovid finally assimilates his new surroundings can be interpreted on an allegorical level as a suggestion to the contemporary Australians that they need to identify with the Australian landscape, languages and values, and not consider Australia as mere second-hand Europe.

All this undoubtedly is artistic but the political overtones cannot be neglected altogether. He seems to be in direct contrast with the conceptions as generally are believed to be the hallmarks of postcolonialism like longing for imaginary homeland, identity crisis, hybridity and ambivalence.

### **Escapist?**

The way Malouf projects his ideas, at times compels the reader to believe that he is an escapist but on close scrutiny it comes to forefront that his view is a balanced one, and has much appeal than otherwise would have. It becomes obvious in *Remembering Babylon* when he shows how Young Janet McIvor has idealised the image of her parents' home (Scotland).

### **Unsettling Restoration of a Hybrid**

The main character of the novel is Gemmy Fairley, who was thrown overboard when he was thirteen years of age. Subsequently he was rescued by Aborigines with whom he lives for 16 years. As soon as he hears about the presence of white settlers in the south, he seeks them out and meets three children, Lachlan Beattie, and his cousins Janet and Meg McIvor. It is Lachlan who is able to communicate with Gemmy and, "captures him", and the McIvor's take him in.

Gemmy's presence to most of the white settlers, however, is strongly unsettling, and become antagonistic to the McIvor. There is no climax to the escalating tension of the novel; Gemmy disappears and his fate is never really known. The novel ends with the reunion approximately 60 years later of Lachlan and Janet. He has become a politician and she a nun. Gemmy is a "hybrid" of European and Aboriginal culture, a precursor of a future kind of people, bearing a promise of a time when all Australians might truly connect with their land.

The way Malouf's novels resolve the underlying issues finally, indicates a commitment for the betterment of settlers and appropriation of Australian landscapes, history, cultural values and issues of identity. Thus what we see here is that this hybrid is not the site of resistance, who

fights for the colonized identity rather he co-opts a new identity, a different identity than is generally found in the hybrids of other postcolonial writers.

### **Potential Otherness**

Saadi Nikro in his essay, "David Malouf: Exploring Imperial Textuality" has aptly done a charismatic analysis of Gemmy, the wild boy's who according to him, "does not represent a primordial state of being, and thus a figure of reconciliation, beyond the complexities of articulating and negotiating difference through social and cultural exchange, but embodies a transitional site of potential otherness whose identity remains an ongoing process of dialogue and self-understanding".

### **A Significant Deviation from Other Postcolonial Writers**

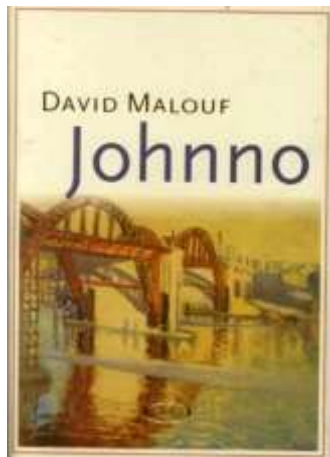
Malouf wants to assert the fact that the settlers in mid-19th century North Queensland had to re-orient their mental geography and make the Australian landscape their own. This type of message is not generally found in other postcolonial writers like V. S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, and S. Rushdie.

Suvendrini Perera, in "Unspeakable Bodies: Representing the Aboriginal in Australian Critical Discourse" (1994), argues that Malouf's creation of the white Aboriginal figure, Gemmy Fairley, contributes to a "discourse of happy hybridisation" (Perera 17) that glosses over the realities of Aboriginal dispossession. Perera argues that, "Instead of refiguring the opposition between 'savagism and civilization', between settler and indigene, coloniser and colonised, Malouf's text reinscribes these oppositions even as it appears to develop a redemptive narrative of hybridity (Perera 21).

### **Malouf's Ambivalence**

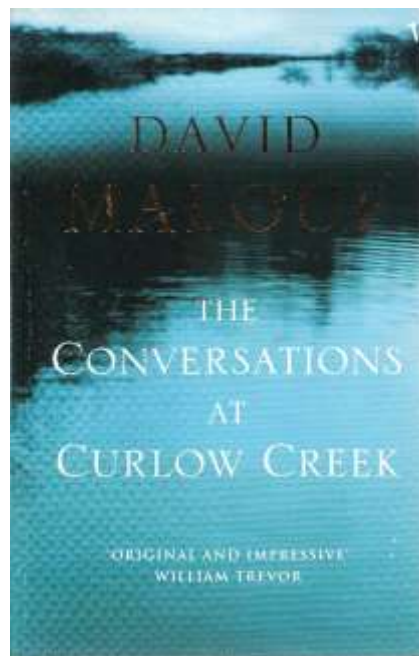
Malouf seems to be ambivalent but has a different type of ambivalence, i. e, whether to ally with the natives, or with the settlers. However, he seems to be more concerned about his personal welfare and that of settlers. Malouf cannot truly represent the position of Aboriginal Australians, who are still 'colonized' and are operating within social, political and economic structures imposed by a dominant cultural framework other than their own.

In complete contrast to the afore mentioned novels, *Johnno*, recasts a different scenario where the narrator Dante begins by viewing his home town Brisbane as utterly alien, and yet ends with a sense of belonging to this place of his formative years. Malouf is not completely silent over the colonial atrocities to which Australian Aboriginals have been subjected, but still the reader finds it hard to believe that Malouf is able to portray the real sufferings of Aboriginal Australians accurately.



### Flashbacks

Malouf's most recent novel, *Conversations at Curlow Creek*, is set in 1827 in New South.



Malouf uses the technique of long flashbacks to foreground the upbringing in Ireland of the central character, Michael Adair, who is an army officer. Adair is under orders to supervise the hanging of Carney (an escaped convict-turned-bushranger) at dawn, despite his increasing respect for, and sympathy with, his fellow Irishman. Closer to the foreground is the familiar Maloufian project of exploring the issues of identity and landscape that is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand it evokes a sense of adjustment, and on the other hand the smell of colonial trauma is pervading the text's atmosphere. The novel shows Malouf at his best when it comes to the

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portrayal of convincing characters. Malouf explores the lives of ordinary people, but at the same time he addresses the big issues of history and identity.

Thus what can be inferred is that Malouf's fiction is politically motivated, and the main tenets of postcolonial literature gets (un)consciously appropriated by him that suit the designs of settlers more than Australian Aboriginals. The way Malouf treats the colonial history of Australia, baffles the reader as Malouf unsettles the assumptions of mainstream postcolonial discourse, and he generates a different scenario that baffles even the great literary scholars.

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