
UNIT 1 CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN FICTION: AN OVERVIEW

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will give you an overview of contemporary Australian Fiction.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Australian fiction is no longer compelled to concentrate on the 'matter of Australia' to proclaim its identity as a National Literature. It has also challenged the idea that one representative literature speaks to all Australians. Contemporary Australian fiction does this when it attempts to re-write or re-present dominant narratives about Australia-its history, its migration patterns, its Anglo-Celtic identity and its relationship to the aboriginal owners of the land. Though the facts of the first century of white settlement have not changed, the stories Australians tell about them today are very different from the ones told fifty years ago, especially with regard to relationships between the white invaders and the original inhabitants of the country, the aborigines.

The fiction scene in Australia today covers Anglo-writing, Migrant writing and Indigenous writing. It has moved from its initial concerns with romance and realism to a rich diversity that puts it on par with the best contemporary fiction anywhere in the world. Their fiction today is characterized by formal inventiveness, experimental design and structure. It is richly diverse in its expression and investigation of Australian culture. Key elements in that process have included the examination of the post-colonial condition (the remaining and revaluation of the past in the present), the emergence of challenges by women writers and the assertion of new directions in Aboriginal culture.

1.2 MANY TRENDS

Australian fiction from the sixties to the nineties began with a rejection of the Australian Legend (i.e. the pioneer legend that celebrates rural values of the settler such as egalitarianism and fairness) and moved towards a post-modern fabrication or refusal of significance (meaning-making systems). If it is necessary to set a date for contemporary fiction in Australia it would be from the 1970's onwards for, this

period has been the most productive in terms of value and volume. Helen Daniel in her book about the new fiction writers of the 1970 generation referred to them as 'Lear's' because of their various moves away from conventional realism. This helped her to group together different writers under a common tendency to undermine the authority of fiction. These writers were post-modern in their deliberate fabrications, their use of unreliable narrators (i.e. the narrator that the reader distrusts—a phrase from Wayne C. Booth.) Also, David Lodge has suggested that there is no such thing as an objective, reliable narrator since any presentation of an event will always imply an attitude towards it. Nick Caraway is an unreliable narrator in Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* and anti-authoritarian central figures Michael Wilding too has suggested that recent Australian fiction starts from rejecting the Australian legend and ends up with 'American lies'. There is a shared preoccupation with the very fictionality of fiction together with language and the failure of language to fully encompass experience. Writers today are concerned with the distance between language and perception. Janette Turner-Hospital in *The Last magician* (1992). The image of the vortex or spiral is used to demonstrate the accumulation of meaning. David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* is also concerned with the problem of language and its failure to communicate. Contemporary Australian fiction has many strands. There are the traditionalists-followers of the realist tradition of Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy—who continue to take up themes of social realism. Some of this new fiction can be seen as a development of the old realist and nationalist tradition as it moved from nationistic identity to a confrontation with communist politics and then on to a re-examination of cultural identity.

1.2.1 The Realistic Novels

Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy and Barbara Baynton were realists who preferred to deal with ordinary men and women. Like D.H. Lawrence, they believed in the novel as a reflection of life, the fundamentals of which are simple: countryside, the great Australian Outback (the Bush), though they have also written city novels. Other writers linked to this tradition are Henry Kingsley, Rolf Boldrewood (Thomas. E. Ethel Anderson), Katherine Thompson While the Lawson-Furphy tradition has been valorized as a nationalistic one, it is also a gender-biased one that favours the Australian male. Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* is the celebration of a bush hero but it is, also a satire on a national type. The traditionalists were also responsible for the formation of a nationalist stance—and a national identity. The 1890's saw Australia on its way to federation. This nationalism has since come under attack as it is believed that this concept of nation was realised retrospectively and therefore never existed in the 1890's. It was a myth. It has become impossible for a largely urban society to identify completely with 'national' types like 'the bushman' or the 'larriken' (a rough, rowdy, boisterous young man). Contemporary fiction mirrors this disenchantment with Russell Ward's 'true Australian' but continues to find 'the Australian Legend' a 'spirituous Mundi' (a storehouse) of images for their fictions. Images of these national types merge with postmodern preoccupations and a writer like Peter Carey ridicules one such type, the 'yarn spinner' in his novel *The Illywhacker* (1985). Contemporary feminists have questioned the masculinity of this national identity forged by these traditionalists. They have challenged the male national mythology of mateship (the ideal of brotherhood—Australian ideas of mateship were a product of their isolated way of life where 'a mate was a bulwark against loneliness, a help in time of sickness and accident'. (John Docker, In a *Critical Condition* 1984, p 116) Miriam Dixson in *The Real Matilda* (1976) speaks of mateship as 'deeply antipathetic to women after re-defining the term as 'an informal male-bonding institution involving sublimated homosexuality "Australian society has shown at times an unbrotherly, crude xenophobia... a blind racial prejudice" (T. Inglis Moore, *Social patterns in Australian Literature*, 1971, p 235)

1.2.2 The Traditionalists

The traditionalists set up a discourse that saw an oppositional relationship between Australia and Britain. The landscape and people took on a distinct Australian identity. The closing words of Lawson's story, 'The Bush Undertaker', mirrors this stance: "And the sun sank over the grand 'Australian bush-the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird and of much that is different from things in other lands'. Contemporary writers have contested this notion that a post-colonial nation can only represent itself in reference to a European model. Traditionalists have conceptualised Australian space either as a hostile prison house or as a Utopian paradise. This dichotomy or 'double aspect' as Judith Wright calls it continues in contemporary fiction. The specificity of place continues to play an important role in fiction. The place is so big that it can never be written out.

Opposed to the realists there was the other stream of traditionalists, the writers of popular romance such as Tasma (Jessie Louvreur) and Ada Cambridge. This parallel tradition continues in contemporary fiction. Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) brought these two traditions of realism and romance together providing at the same time a position for a female subject in a patriarchal male oriented society.

Patrick White's famous dismissal of the traditionalists as 'the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism' saw the beginnings of a shift in literary values in Australia. Realism made way for innovative ideology (i.e. the system of beliefs and practices and stories which underpin and justify a way of life). Patrick White was the first to lead Australian fiction into a new era of experiment and innovation. White began as a traditionalist in *The Tree of Man* (1955) and *Voss* (1957) but soon began to write in a modernist mode, like Randolph Stow. Stow's *To the Islands* (1958) and *Tourmaline* (1963) are surrealistic in their settings in remote landscape of Australia. A realist to begin with Stow moved on to write abstract fictions of symbolic and mythic content. White's influence can be seen in the posthumously published novel of Christina Stead, *I'm Dying Laughing* (1986) where she expressed a sense of disillusionment with the modern world. These writers paved the way for contemporary writers such as Thomas Keneally, Peter Carey, Elizabeth Jolley, Thea Astley and Kate Grenville.

1.2.3 Repositioning

Basically Australian writing is a New World Literature reflecting the concerns of displaced peoples and cultures such as the Anglo Celts and European Whites (displaced from England and Europe) the Aborigines (displaced from their own land), the migrant writers who adopt their language and culture to life in a new land and the internationalists (the transcultural writers) who try to recolonise the old world. There are differences in this New World Literatures: such as the distinction between the settler literatures of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa; the literature of the displaced and subject peoples in the West Indies and the literature of indigenous peoples in Africa, India and the Pacific Islands. It is perhaps possible to read the cultural history of Australia as a continuing 'identity crisis', a constant repositioning of cultural markers and cultural boundaries. Australia has defined itself by similarity and contrast, in relation to British culture, in relation to the land itself and its indigenous people, in relation to the so-called 'Western' world and in relation to its geographical neighbours in Asia and the Pacific. Contemporary fiction in Australia reflects the conflicts between power and ownership, high and popular cultures, male and female, between generations, between metaphor and metonymy and formalism and realism. Contemporary narratives provide a cognitive map of Australian society, indicating the nation's preoccupations and commenting on Australian life. Urban landscaper dominate as Australians now live mostly in metropolitan centres, but a sense of awe for Australia's geographical isolation remains a feature of contemporary writing; writers now speak of the politicisation of

space in terms of 'margins' and 'periphery'. Malouf's discourse reflects this subliminality (an in-between space, a threshold area)

There is also a move away from nationalistic concerns. Writers investigate or depict the nature and influence of political (or personal) power. They are engaged in constructing a new Australian tradition. Locality and place have become important vehicles for the exploration of a sense of identity and the colonial past. Recent Australian fiction reflects not just an Anglo-Saxon or Celtic heritage but a multicultural, multi-vocal society with difference in the way Australians see themselves. All these concerns will be illustrated later in the works of individual writers that make up the new diversity of Australian fiction.

Many Australian novelists have been drawn to a re-writing of their country's historical past in an effort to understand it. Peter Carey makes a pertinent remark in his *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) when he says, "I learned long ago to distrust local history". David Malouf in *Remembering Babylon* (1993) takes up this stance when he re-writes the myth of settlement. In a way the novel is a re-working of the 'battlers' as the early settlers were known as several novels have been written about these 'Battlers'. In fact the 'Battler' attitude is still popular in contemporary Australian society. Aboriginal writers like Mudrooroo (formerly Colin Johnson) and Sally Morgan contest this white mythmaking and attempt to reclaim aboriginal history. Contemporary writers focus on the fictionality of history and this contradicts the notion that history is 'constructed'. Paul Radley, the narrativist stressed the fictionality of history because it is narrative. History is just a fiction which a majority has agreed upon."

Thomas Keneally's *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967) deals with life in the convict settlements as does *The Playmaker* (1987) another convict novel which explores the theme of convictism and its historical representations. Jessica Anderson's *The Commandment* (1975) and Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) follow the trend. These two novels are set in part in the penal colony of Moretown Bay in Queensland. A darker revisionist novel is Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1972) which is based on attacks on white farmers by a much provoked aborigine at the time of the Boar War and the Australian Federation.

Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows* (1976) like Mudrooroo's *Dr. Wooreddy* deals with the near extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines. It is interesting to compare and contrast these two re-constructions; one from the perspectives of a white man, the other from that of an Aborigine (though Mudrooroo is now displaced as American Creole rather than indigenous Australian). Rodney Hall re-imagines the Gatton murders of the early years in *Captivity Captive* (1988). The most ambitious comic presentation of Australian colonial history is Peter Carey's debunking of the picaresque mode in *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and *Illywhacker* (1985). David Forester's *Moonlite* (1981) and Peter Mather's *Trap* (1966) are also narratives of the 'failed vision'. History is used as a 'vast visual image bank' for effects and for settings, for even comic eccentricity.

The World Wars have also been a recurrent theme for present day writers. The Gallipoli landing in 1915 was a moment of national crisis that has grown into the *Anzac myth of popular culture*. Roger McDonald's *1915* (1979) and Jack Bennett's *Gallipoli* (1981) are fictional responses to this event. Australians in wars abroad are the subject of David Malouf's early fiction such as *Johnno* (1975), *Fly Away Peter* (1981) and *The Great World* (1990). Martin Boyd's *When Blackbirds Sing* (1962) is perhaps the best Australian novel about World War I. Boyd states his case for pacifism and shares a preoccupation with settlement history that underlies the best Australian novels.

Nicholas Hasluck's *Truant State* (1987) and Nigel Kranth's *Matilda My Darling* (1983) turn back to specific moments in Australian history. Kranth's novel reconstructs the context which inspired AB Patterson's famous ballad, 'Waltzing

Matilda'. *Truant State* examines the conflicts in Australian society after World War I. Hasluck analyses the role of the individual in history and examines the conflicts in Australian society after World War I. The message is that one cannot play truant from history. The settlers cannot leave the history of their mother land behind. History becomes a kind of 'inquest' of the past. Hasluck's earlier novel *The Bellarmine Jung* (1984) brings together events from 1629, 1948 and 1978 linking a mutiny on board a Dutch ship off the coast of a student studying in Amsterdam. This metafiction also speculates on the fictionality of history as it turns to an undocumented discovery of Australia by Dutch Sailors. An earlier novel by Christopher Koch, *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978) set in Indonesia in the 1960's reflects on the politics of Western intervention in Asia. His more recent prize winning novel *Highways to a War* (1995) explores a similar theme. Through this novel Koch recreates the Vietnam War. In the above novels Australian writers have moved away from Australian history but continue to reflect on Australian politics and society. Rodeny Hall's *The Islands in the Mind* (1996) is a historical re-construction of seventeenth century European imaginings of an unknown land in the South (Australia). Like Hasluck's novel it offers a missionary myth of origins for European Australians. Women novelists have also undertaken to reimagine Australian history but we will look at their attempts in the following account of contemporary fiction by women.

1.3 WOMEN'S FICTION

The last forty years have seen a great upsurge in women's fiction in Australia. Debra Adelaide's 1998 bibliography lists 450 women writers. Australian publishers were accused of a feminist bias. The distinctive features of women's writing in Australia are its "energy, its resilience and its determination to tell the truth, even when this contradicts the comfortable complacencies of Australian belief" (Shirley Walker, *Guide to Women's Literariness*, p.171) Dale Spender, the Australian feminist critic, maintains that women writers wrote about different issues in different ways from the men. "What women writers saw and made of the continent and its inhabitants was a long way from the world of 'mateship' and make a decidedly different body of literature with distinctly different traditions." The women's literary tradition has provided the voice of the 'other' which challenges the optimistic centralist vision of Australian life. Women writers like their counterparts in Britain, America and India wrote different kinds of fiction. Some were interested in re-historicising the past, some in family sagas, others in social realism while some others examined the writing process. Nearly all were attempts to capture certain areas of female experience.

Ever since Caroline Leakey wrote the first convict novel, *The Broad Arrow* (1859) about fifteen years ahead of Marcus Clarke's more famous *His Natural Life* (1874), women writers have been in the forefront of writing in Australia. Established writers such as Thea Astley, Jessica Anderson, Elizabeth Jolley and Shirley Hazard are signposts in fiction today.

Thea Astley who began her career in the 1950's is a social satirist whose fiction is based on themes of persecution of the individual and the prevalence of colonialism and racism in Australia. Influenced by Patrick White, her novel *The Slow Natives* (1965) concentrates on spiritual crisis in individual lives. Just like White's *Riders in the Chariot*, Astley's move away from the realist mode was significant. It set the trend for contemporary fiction to be innovative and experimental. Her novel *The Kindness Cup* (1974) is a study of fear and guilt and is another "contact narrative:" where white Australians and indigenous people meet. It concerns an Aboriginal girl who leapt to her death after being pushed by a group of whites. It marks the author's concern with racist attitudes in Australia. *Its Raining in Mango* (1987) is a witty episodic narration of the Laffrey family. *Reaching Tin River* (1990) explores women's marginal position in society. Her latest work, *The Multiple Effects of*

Rainshadow (1996) re-examines a violent incident in history and once again explores the topical theme of race relations. The incident is examined from several angles.

Jessica Anderson, another internationally acclaimed writer has attempted an understanding of social dynamics. Although she came to writing relatively late in life she has since achieved real success. She too uses the realist tradition to explore female experience, though her early novels have male protagonists. Her first novel *An Ordinary Lunacy* (1963) explores man-woman relationships. It is a study of obsessive passion combined with a keen observation of sophisticated Sydneyites. *The Commandant* (1975) is an historical novel based on the life of Captain Logan the sadistic commander of a convict settlement. *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978) is Anderson's best novel. This novel has an interesting generic history; it started as a short story, was then written as a radio play, and finally published as a novel. The experimental nature of the novel stems from the use of intertextual references to Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shalott' together with Elizabeth Bishop's poem, 'The Gentleman of Shalott' which remind the reader that it is a literary text, an artifact and not a 'slice of life'. Nora can be seen as the failed artist in her fictional recreations of her memories. The narration takes place in two time frames, the virtual present and the narrative of her past life. Nora's various voices and perspectives are dramatic. Memory is a major subject of Nora's story which is told as a journey through Nora's different 'selves'. Being a feminine Odyssey, the novel belongs to the 'second wave of feminism in Australia', the wave that saw German Green's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). As in Jean Bedford's *Sister Kate* (1982) the point of view is consistently that of a female. Jessica Anderson's recent novel *One of the Wattle Birds* (1994) presents an interesting parallel and contrast to *Tirra Lirra*. Its young narrator Cecily Ambruss is also portrayed as a potential artist caught in a complex web of family conflict. Social mores have changed from the time of Nora's youth. Cecily is an illegitimate child living in a de facto relationship. But she is haunted by the restrictive codes of the previous generation. This novel too has an intertext evoking Arthurian legend, *Morte D'Arthur*.

Elizabeth Jolley is another outstanding Australian writer, who achieved both local and international success. Her novels are complex reflective fictions within fictions which seem to question the basis of reality. She too is concerned with sexual freedom for the individual. Her work illuminates many post-structuralist feminist concerns by a process of creation play. Her early novels, *Palomino* (1980) and *Milk and Honey* (1984), developed contemporary Gothic narratives by which she explored dark secrets. The relationships of writing to life become elements of cyclical plots in *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983), *Foxybaby* (1985) and *the Well* (1986). Yet Jolley always explores the darker side, the secret elements in women's lives, and perhaps the deriving force behind her work, too, has been autobiographical, in that her masterly trilogy *My Father's Noon* (1989), *Cabin Fever* (1990) and *the George Wife* (1993) seem to be exercising elements from the writer's own past. "Jolley, like Campbell, transform any autobiographical impulse into a sophisticated, conscious art – nevertheless, her novels speak of women's experiences and their fears. When reading, *The Well*, *Miss Peabody* or *Foxybaby*, one may enjoy the post-modern layering of narrative, and laugh at Jolley's whimsical or absurdist humour. But the core of such novels always contain a horror – death, incest, loneliness, the use of sex for power – which figures not as an external oppression but as a potentiality within her mildest women characters." (Bruce Bennett, p. 318-319) Moreover her experiment with form reaches a peak in *Foxy Baby* (1985) which is basically writing about writing. *The Well* (1986) uses the gothic mode to describe another disturbing relationship. In *The Sugar Mother* (1988) Leila Bott and her mother insinuate themselves into the ordered life of the academic Edwin Page. Each of these novels provides a new perspective on one of Jolley's constant themes: women and the creative process. Jolley is a constant experimenter whose novels are textually complex. Her most recent novel *Lovesong* (1997) is about music, where the act of performing and listening to music represent moments of transcendent sensuality, similar in some ways to Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* (1999).

Though women writers continued to record women's experience in conventional ways, many were innovative and experimental. Helen Garner's work traces the fortunes of the women of her generation who had witnessed the first wave of the liberation movement in the 1960's. Her fiction continues two key elements in contemporary women's writing: the attempt to capture female experience and the attempt to find a suitable narrative structure. *Monkey Grip* (1977) set in Carlton (Melbourne) is the story of a young woman's infatuation with a heroine addict. Her other novels, *The Children's Beach* (1984), *Cosmo Cosmolino* and *The First Stone* (1995) are also concerned with the 'Angst' of the urban scene.

Finola Moorhead's *Remember the Tarantella* (1987) uses five women characters in a patterned narrative that uses dance as its motif. *Barbara Hanrahan's Sea Green* (1974) reads like a condemnation of her earlier autobiography. *Dove* (1982) and *Kanpee Doll* (1984) focus on restoring the female voice. Marion Campbell's *Lines of Flight* (1985), *Not being Mirriam* (1988) and *The Golden Dress* (1988) are concerned with the artist's self and explore the problem of language as well as the writing process. Janette Turner Hospital challenges the genre in *Charades* (1988) which uses the paradigm of schizoid in her examination of the woman's voice. Interestingly enough Murray Bail in his *Eucalyptus* (1988) also stresses the power of the story letter's art but through a male voice. Turner Hospital's other novels are *The Ivory Swing* (1982) which is set in Southern India, *The Last Magician* (1992) and *Oyster* (1996). This last novel explores the gothic potential of an isolated cult. Turner-Hospital like Shiley Hazard of the 1980's could also be seen as a transcultural novelist as her fictional world includes a number of countries such as India, Canada, America and England.

A re-imagining of Australia's historical past has also been attempted by women writers such as Kate Grenville, Jean Bedford and Sara Dowse. In *Joan Makes History* (1988). Grenville's female consciousness, Joan, now to 'make' Australian history. She is present at several key moments in Australian history from Captain Cook's landing in 1770 to the opening of Parliament in 1901. In this revisionist novel, Australian history becomes her story. Jean Bedford's *Sister Kate* retells the story of the famous bushranger Ned Kelly from a female perspective, that of his sister Kate. Robert Drewe's *Our Sunshine* (1991) brings in the male perspective with Ned Kelly himself as the narrator. Sara Dowse's *West Block* (1983) is a political novel on the Fraser administration and it has a political context-the dismissal of the Whitlam Government (Gough Whitlam-a former Prime minister of Australia). Amanda Lohrey is another political writer who uses her novels to explore issues of public and private morality. These are *The morality Gentleman* (1989), *The Reading Group* (1988) and *Camille's Bread* (1996). Other significant novels are Drusilla Modyeska's *Poppy* (1990) Kate Grenville's *Lillian Story* (1986) Janine Burke's *Speaking* (1984), Carmel Bird's *The Bluebird's Cage* (1990) and *The White Garden* (1995) and Sue Wolf's *Leaning towards Infinity* (1996). Some writing by men could also be read as feminist such as David Ireland's *A Woman of the Future* (1979) and *City of Woman* (1981) together with David Forster's *Mates of Mars* (1991) which also explores the gender divide.

1.4 THE ABORIGINAL FICTION

Another important skein in contemporary fiction is that of the Aboriginal writing. Aboriginal novelists, like Mudrooroo Narogin (formerly Colin Johnson) find the issue of where home is rather problematic. His first novel *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) is densely plotted and follows four days in the drifting life of an angry nineteen years old Aboriginal petty criminal after his release from prison. The sense of time in this novel is elastic as the past blends into the present. His best known novels weave character and incident with ironic dexterity. *Long Line Sandawara* (1979) is about a

group of aboriginal guerilla fighters "beginning the project of restoring the place of aborigines in Australian history" (The Oxford Literary History of Australia, p.322) Dr. Wooreddy's *Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983) re-historicism the annihilation of the Tasmanian Aborigines through the eyes of Wooreddy, a wiseman of the tribe. *Wild Cat Screaming* (1992) is a sequel to *Wild Cat Falling*. Archie Weller's social realist novel *The Day of the Dog* (1981) reflects the anger and frustration experienced by young urban Aborigines in Perth. Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Song* (1910) is a gruesome account of Aboriginal revenge in Brisbane while Kim Scott's *True Country* explores contact with Whites in a sensitive account of life in the Kimberley. The female aboriginal voices find expression in poetry and autobiography rather than in fiction, except for Faith Bandler's *Wachovia* (1977).

1.5 MIGRANT WRITING

Migrant writing is one more significant area in contemporary fiction. Here too there are both male and female voices. A vital theme in Australian fiction is the question of where home is and consequently the fate of the homecomer to Australia. the nation of migrants ("Everyone after Cook is migrant") which has adopted multiculturalism as apart of its national policy continues to produce writing that critiques the conflict between cultural and physical belonging. While Murray Baul's *Homesickness* (1980) is a satire on this theme as he describes an ignorant group of Australian tourists abroad, Time Winton's *The Readers* (1994) exploits this theme of 'Australian abroad'. Novelists like Blanche D'Alpuget, Robert Drewe and Christopher Koch try to situate Australia within the Asia-Pacific region rather than in relation to Europe.. But the writers who reveal the development of a new hybridity in the Australian consciousness are the first generation migrants of contemporary society. Some of these, writers of Asian background such as Meena Abdullah, Yasmine Gooneratne, Christopher Cyrill and Brian Castro have marginalised the white Australian in their work. Migrant writers have added to the vitality and diversity of the literary scene in Australia. The voice of the migrant now speak's through new forms of fiction.

Reviewing the literature produced in Australia by multicultural writers since the time of the Second World War, Sneja Gunew (1994) and Annette Corkhill (1994) Both discern a number of characteristic stages or modes of writing. The writing produced by migrants who have recently arrived in Australia tends to be 'contrapuntal': it juxtaposes the old culture with the new - it is cross cultural - it is frequently nostalgic and is more often conventional. The most typical of such writing is the prose description of the migrant experience itself: the feeling of uprootedness, or of cultural dislocation is strong and the struggle of the migrant to find his/her place in the new country is a major theme. Judah Waten's *Alien Son* (1952) is a good example making a living which is at the forefront of the migrant's mind. In the midst of the struggle to learn a new language and to adjust to a new environment., many migrants considered the very act of writing a luxury. Nevertheless remains a marginalised discourse. Another mode of this writing is that of translation or mediation. The writing functions as a mediation between cultures. The scope widens as writers began to experiment with form. Antigone Kefala, Ania Walwicz's Rosa Capiello's and Anna Conani's distinct voices reflect their multicultural origins. There is a strong sense of an implied author speaking through the narrator. Silence has been the destiny of many migrants from non-English speaking cultures. These texts consciously break that silence. The power to narrate bestows a kind of political power (the power to hold a speaking position).

I include here some of the more strident migrant voices in contemporary fiction in Australia. This brief survey should help you to locate these texts within the framework provided in the preceding paragraph. /

Maria Lewett's autobiographical novel *No Snow in December* (1985) is an account of a Polish immigrant family. The theme of alienation through language is repeated in Antigone Kefala's *Alexia* (1984). Benery Farmer's and Angelo Loukakis' short stories also deal with the Greek migrant community. Rosa Cappiello in *Oh Lucky Country* (1984) (a translation from the original in Italian) searches for a language to express things beyond the bounds of Australian English. Cappiello's novel speaks to the reader from a double distance; from the position as a migrant and from the position as a woman.

Brian Castro has been variously described as Asian, Asian-Australian and Chinese-Australian. He is multicultural in the real sense and is a good illustration of the difficulty Australians have in dealing with people who do not fit into convenient cultural categories. *Birds of Passage* (1982), his first novel belongs to the category of 'contrapuntal' multicultural writing: it juxtaposes the old culture with the new; it traces the various stages of the migrant experience and the displaced person's search for a new identity. The story has two protagonists, Seamus O'young and Shaw. Only Shaw is actually a migrant: he comes from China during the Gold rush in the late 1850's and later returns to his home country. The Present day Seamus is an Asian-looking, Australian-born orphan of unknown origin and thus the subject of much speculation and fantasising. The novel is a search for a history, for a story that can provide Seamus with an identity. Both strands of the novel are firmly anchored in the history of Australia and explores racist attitudes. Twentieth century Australia, while becoming multicultural has not cast off its racist heritage. The novel employs complex narrative techniques. Both characters are engaged in story telling and it is perhaps possible to read Seamus as a character written into Shaw's story. It is a typical postmodern text as it resists any reading that tries to make sense of all the elements in its intricate plot. The reader is forced to be an active partner in the creative process. There is a preoccupation with narrative theory especially when Seamus meets a middle-aged Frenchman on a train to London who identifies himself as Roland Barthes, a well known theorist of narrative. Barthes' famous essay 'The death of the author' (1977) argues that the real authority over meaning fictional narratives is not the author but the reader who is free to interpret the text as s/he wishes. The 'double' is a recurrent feature in Castro's fiction. His other novels *Double Wolf* (1991), *After China* (1992) and *Drift* (1994) also include strange parallels and coincidences between characters and stories. His most recent novel *Stepper* (1997) revisits the life of Soviet agent Richard Sorge and links it with his protagonist Victor Stepper.

Beth Yahp's fiction *The Crocodile Fury* (1992) adapts Malaysian modes of narration to her novel of family history and fairy tale. To line Epanomitis' novel *The Mule's Foal* (1993) focuses on events in a small Greek village and uses magic realism to successfully marginalise the majority. (Magic realism: first used to characterise the work of South American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquees. It is used to refer to the inclusion of any mythic or legendary material from a specific culture in fiction) Adib Khan's *Seasmal Adjustments* (1994) is about a Bangladeshi migrant while Yasmine Goonaratne's *A Change of Skies* looks at the Sri Lankan experience in Australia.

The Hand that signed the Paper (1995) sparked off a controversy when it was found that Helen Demidenko, its author, was no Ukranian refugee but Helen Darwin from a British background. Peter Kirkpatrick *The Cry of the Goldfinch* (1997) with its complex characterisation draws the reader into a complicity with the crimes of the paedophile (child molester) pivotal character Bujak. Richard Haes *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997) is the disturbing story of a Slovenian refugee in Tasmania.

The late 1990's have seen an eruption of young writing talent in Australia together with exciting new texts from the 'old masters'. Peter Carey's *Jack maggs* (1997) is a metafictional text which interacts with Dicken's *Great Expectations*, Maggs being the convict who helped Pip. David Foster's *The Ballad of Erinungarah* (1997) is both a

poem and a novel. Its intertextuality includes material from myths, medieval poetry and the myths of the Aboriginal Dreaming (the timeless time of ancestral beings). Murray Baul's *Eucalyptus* (1998) is a contemporary fairy tale about a father/daughter relationship as the father plans to marry his daughter to the man who can accurately name each one of the thousands of eucalyptus trees on his estate. The daughter, however, falls in love with a man who can weave together magical narrative threads.

Several first novels showcased new talent such as Giongia Blain's *Closed for Winter* (1998) described as 'beachside gothic'

Tom Gillings *The Sooterkin* (1998) explores an earlier Australian society of Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania) in 1820. Thomas Shapcott's *Theatre of Darkness* (1998) moves between the poetic and functional genres. Carmel Bird's *Red Shoes* (1998) has a CD-ROM with visual and musical contributions which can be read together with the text or instead of it.

The recent trend of 'dirty realism' or 'grunge' writing was initiated by some young writers who prefer to write about the material realities of contemporary life. One such 'grunge' novelist is Andrew McGahan, but his novel *1998* (1995) is also a revaluation of Australian history. Perhaps Graeme Turner, a leading Australian critic of fiction has the best last words on the subject: 'the picture which emerges... is that of a mature literary culture... negotiating new and hybridized versions of the national through a diversity of textual forms and critical receptions' (The Oxford Literary History of Australia, p. 363).

It can be concluded that 'Australia' is itself a narrative formation and the texts listed in this unit all present different (sometimes compatible, sometimes conflicting) stories about its history, its peoples and its cultures.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have classified the Contemporary Fiction and have given an overview of the fiction written by the contemporary writers.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. 'Australianness, like mateship, is a myth which serves specific interests and ideologies.' Explain this statement and relate it to some of the texts you have read about in this Unit.
2. How is contemporary Australian Fiction classified? Name some of the categories.
3. How is the idea of place and landscape central to the way Australians define themselves? Examine how the idea of place is presented in contemporary fiction.
4. Who are the traditionalists? How have they influenced contemporary writers in Australia?
5. How is history re-imagined and re-worked in contemporary Australian fiction?
6. "History is just a fiction which a majority has agreed now". Discuss this idea in relation to texts which deal with actual "historical" events in Australia. Do they resist or celebrate conventional accounts?
7. How do some Australian novels challenge the idea that there is one representative literature which speaks for all Australians?
8. Discuss some of the experimental fiction you have read about in this unit. Look at experiments in both content and form.

9. Name some of the writers who mix a variety of genres in their fiction. Identify these genres and explain the purpose of bringing these forms together.
10. List some of the international or transitional novels you have read about in this unit. What are their concerns?
11. Show how 'rational masculine codes' are out of fashion in contemporary Australian fiction.
12. What are the concerns of contemporary women writers in Australia?
13. Write a brief account of novelists who reconstruct images of Australian society.
14. How do contemporary novelists map Australian society? What do these novels suggest about Australian life?
15. What is Australia's double aspect? How is it projected in contemporary fiction?
16. Give a brief account of indigenous writing. How do Aboriginal writers reclaim their history.
17. What is a migrant novel? Is it un-Australian? Discuss some of the novels that have been placed into this category.
18. Compare and contrast how migrant writers and Aboriginal writers express their relationship to Australian society.
19. Would you use the word postcolonial in relation to contemporary Australian fiction? What texts would you choose as illustrations?
20. Urban landscapes dominate but a sense of awe of Australia's geographic isolation remains a feature of contemporary writing-discuss.

UNIT 2 THE AUTHOR, HIS CREATIVITY, AND REMEMBERING BABYLON

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Author and His Creativity
- 2.3 Chronology
- 2.4 Select Bibliography
- 2.5 Summary of the Novel
 - 2.5.1 Chapter 1
 - 2.5.2 Chapter 2
 - 2.5.3 Chapter 3
 - 2.5.4 Chapter 4
 - 2.5.5 Chapter 5
- 2.6 The Remaining Chapters
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will introduce you to the author, David Malouf and his creative output.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

You may have heard about a group of writers from Australia who visited India in 1996 under the New Horizons' Festival sponsored by the Australian Government. One of them was George Joseph David Malouf (Ma-louf), a transcultural contemporary Australian novelist, poet, writer of short fiction, playwright and librettist. In this unit and the subsequent ones, we will discuss Malouf once his novel, *Remembering Babylon*.

The inspiration for David Malouf's seventh novel, *Remembering Babylon* (1993) comes from an account by E. Reynolds, a nineteenth century historian, of an English sailor, James Morrill, who lived for seventeen years among the Queensland aborigines before returning to white society. His words when revealing himself to a group of shepherds, were 'Do not shoot! I am a British object, a shipwrecked sailor'. Malouf's novel, however, not an historical novel, though it re-imagines the key moments in Australian history. Despite its time span which stretches from the middle of the nineteenth century to the first world war, the concerns of the characters and the ideas of the novel are very much alive in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Gemmy Fairley, the central character of *Remembering Babylon* has not been shipwrecked. He is cast overboard by his shipmates while suffering from fever. On being washed ashore, he is tended by the Aborigines with whom he lives for sixteen years. His arrival in the small farming settlement twelve miles from Bowen has a profound effect on all members of the small colony. Their lives will never be the same.

The two quotations at the beginning of the novel suggest the theme. The first extract, from William Blake's long prophetic poem, 'The Four Zoas,' expresses a state of

confusion. The protagonists can no longer distinguish their homeland, Jerusalem from Babylon where they are exiled and in slavery. The second quotation from John Clare gives the poet's vision of the Apocalypse. "In the time of the breaking of nations," of chaos and disaster, what memories remain in the mind?

The Author,
His Creativity

The central question seems to be one concerning Australian identity. Australians are still asking themselves, Who are we? What forces shape us and what is our relationship to the land in which we live? How does it change us? Malouf's novel attempts to answer these questions. It is the same concern we have noticed in his earlier fiction as well.

The novel begins in the middle of the last century, during the colonial period of Australian history. It gives a realistic picture of the harshness of life of selectors or small farmers, those who came from the British Isles as free settlers but without capital and who were given small areas to farm by the government. Small farming in Australia, as in India, has nearly always meant poverty because of the relative aridity of the land compared to Europe and the uncertainty of the climate. We in India are all too aware of how dependent we are on the monsoons. The classic portrait of the selectors' lives is given from a humorous point of view by Steele Rudd in the famous book *On Our Selection* (1899)

Malouf's novel gives an accurate picture of the settler's attitude to the land and their efforts to destroy the ecology of the land by clearing and ring-barking in an attempt to make it more like home. Of all the lands settled in by Europeans in the last three hundred years (viz. America, Canada, New Zealand), Australia has suffered most due to the destruction of the natural habitat and of animal species. Malouf reflects the fear and suspicion of most of the settlers towards the aborigines and of the unofficial policy of genocide i.e. (the killing of a whole race) which prevailed throughout Australia and particularly in Tasmania and Queensland.

The portrait of aboriginal life given in the novel though not detailed nor idyllic, suggests that the tribes achieved a close bonding to each other and to their land and that the natural balance they had with nature went back tens of thousands of years into the early history of humankind on this planet.

Despite its historical setting, the attraction of *Remembering Babylon* lies mostly in the characters that Malouf creates and the ideas and themes that give it a contemporary relevance.

2.2 THE AUTHOR AND HIS CREATIVITY

Born in 1934 in Brisbane, Queensland, Malouf had his schooling at the Brisbane Grammar School and later completed his B.A. (with honours) at the University of Queensland. He has been in and out of Australia, being for sometime in Europe and writing for an international readership hence the term "transcultural" writer, is used as an epithet for him.

Malouf was a prize-winning poet before he published his first novel. Like Thomas Hardy his poetic sensibility pervades his fiction. In an interview published in "The Hindu" on November 17th 1996, Malouf said that he always had wanted to be a writer and had written stories while at School and University. Speaking of his multicultural background he said, "My grandparents came from Lebanon. That did not influence me in any way. In fact the first time I visited Lebanon was last year (1995). It seems in the Arabic world, the Malouf family is a great writing family so may be it is in the genes. My mother was from London. She reproduced her Edwardian England in Australia. She read a lot. Till I was 14, my sister and I had a nurse to take care of us. My mother and she used to read aloud to each other. As a

boy I heard a lot of Dickens, Mrs. Henry Wood and other novelists-very English stuff'.

Malouf first gained attention as a poet. His early poems were personal as he wrote about his grandfather, his sister, his home in 12 Edmonton Street in Brisbane and about the process of growing up. Later he wrote on love and on places in Europe that he visited. These later cultural and historical poems are dense, philosophical and meditative. His first book, *Bicycle and other Poems* (1970) was published when he was twenty-eight. His 1980 poetry collection *First Things Last* is a celebration of the natural world. *Neighbours in Thicket* is an award winning collection.

Malouf's first novel, *Johnno* was written in 1972 and published in 1975 when he was forty. It portrays the spiritual growth and coming of age of two young men who were childhood friends, Johnno and Dante. The story follows the shaky friendship of the narrator Dante and Johnno, an intriguing, disturbed, fatherless youth. Dante's suspicions of Johnno's suicidal tendencies are confirmed when he receives the news of Johnno's death by drowning.

Dante receives an angst-ridden suicide note from Johnno in which he cites Dante's indifference and restraint as reasons for his suicide. But the novel's real concern is novel's Brisbane, the background against which people move and things happen. Nostalgia, a feature of Malouf's art, pervades the novel. The overgrown country town that is now a state capital comes alive with its pubs, alleys, their actual situation, projected on to this land their sense of 'weird melancholy'. Associated with the threatening strangeness of the land, the aborigines became figures of evil, almost diabolical. The Mabo decision was the Australian High Court's rather belated rejection of notion of 'terra nullus', as it gave aboriginal people right over the land which was traditionally theirs. The opponents of Mabo felt that the land rights and native titles to aborigines would hold up economic development. The settlers the regarded the aborigines as different from and inferior to them and this attitude continues even today as the Mabo decision is still debated in contemporary Australia. In fact this novel was published in 1933, the year of the indigenous people and is Malouf's attempt at reconciliation. He attempts to write the aborigines back into history in this novel. Preoccupied as he is with the issues of space and change, the relations between the self and the other, language and silence, Malouf looks at these issues in terms of relations between non-aboriginal and aboriginal Australians. He explores this racial difference in colonial Australia and renews the national symbols of exclusion and imperial power and prosperity by re-imagining them in this novel. The whites and the aborigines are seen in metaphysical terms, as a choice between good and evil, between Jerusalem and Babylon of the title. In the process the novel offers an opportunity to learn a new language of reconciliation, a language of the earth, of nature, a language known to the first Australians, the aborigines.

The novel highlights the Queensland frontier of the 1850's and the settlers' reliance on an imperial power which "held them all, a whole continent in its grip" (p.5)-a power derived from a distant monarch. But the novel also explores the anxiety felt by the settlers as aborigines refuse to acknowledge that imperial authority: "And all around, before and behind, worse than weather and the deepest night, natives, tribes of wandering myalls who, in their trespassing this way and that all over the map, were forever encroaching on boundaries that could be insisted on by daylight." It may seem at first rather odd to associate this colonial outpost with Babylon, but as the first of the books two epigraphs suggests, one of the title's allusions is to Blake's Babylon, a city formed by the dismemberment of Albion (England). The allusion suggests that colonial Australia is a dismembered Albion, formed by successive waves of transportation of convicts and migration of European settlers. If the scattered pieces of Albion's body could be put back together again (re-membered), then according to Blake, Babylon would become a New Jerusalem and Albion would be resurrected. Malouf attempts a similar task in this novel and this involves reconciliation with the first Australians. This project is doubly difficult especially after the Mabo ruling and the controversies over land rights that continue to rage in

present day Australia. Remembering the past and reconciling it with the present can be fraught with problems. Malouf's opening sentence evokes two very different kinds of recollection. The first is a locale of white settlers from which a 'proper' Australian identity springs. But this locale is also the site of violent dispossession. How is Malouf to re-member the different histories and cultures that collide at this point?

Malouf does so when he sets out to re-member the point from which Australian identity springs. The political act of dispossession (of aboriginal land) is translated into psychological fear of the unknown. This fear becomes a threat when Gemmy arrives at the settlement. Gemmy crosses the boundary which divides the white and the black and thus defies imperial colonial authority. What is more terrifying to these the river, gardens, backyards and even the wooden walls and iron roofs. Memory is used to hold together diverse life experiences. Malouf attributes to Johnno an element of mystery. This recurs in many of his novels. If Johnno's death remains a mystery, so does Gemmy Fairley's disappearance in *Remembering Babylon*.

In 1979 Malouf was awarded the New South Wales Premier's Prize for fiction for his second novel, *An Imaginary Life*, a fictionalized account of the ancient Roman poet Ovid's life in exile in Tomis, in 8 AD. The theme of exile is reworked in *Remembering Babylon*. In *An Imaginary Life*, the story works on emotional and philosophical planes. It is a novel of great beauty and power, richly imaginative and poetic. It has been called a 'post colonial meditation' and considered a criticism of civilisation. The exiled poet, Ovid, learns to identify with nature and empathise with an alien culture through a boy reared by wolves-the child-and through the people with whom he lives, lead lives which are simple, elemental but completely in tune with their surroundings. Malouf admits that while writing this novel he was very much influenced as an Australian by the presence of the aborigines. "From outside, aboriginal culture may look strange but it is rich and multi-layered". (The Hindu) Ovid finally comes to believe in the wholeness of creation. Apart from playful parallels such as a shared birthday (Malouf's and Ovid's- March 20th), Malouf admits that he was influenced by Rudyard Kipling and by J.M.G Staid's detailed observations of 'Victor and the wild boy of Aveyron in the eighteenth century. Speaking on this novel at the university of Madras, Malouf observed "silence is a form of communication. Speech divides us". In fact language and communication are tricky issues in his novels. Ovid's metamorphosis is complete when he regains the communion with nature that he had lost in his youth. As Malouf says in his afterward, "My purpose was to make this glib fabulist of "the changes" live out in reality display".

Malouf's 1982 novella, *Fly Away Peter*, which won the *The Age*, Book of the year award, also begins in Australia. Ashley Crowther the protagonist returns to his plantation in Queensland after twelve years in England. Jim Saddler who also lives there is content with observing the numerous species of birds that migrate to the swamps. Ashley turns the estate into a wild life sanctuary and hires Jim to manage it. A nature photographer, Imogen Harcourt, decides to settle down with them till World War I disrupts the calm. Ashley and Jim enlist and encounter the horrors of war. Jim dies abroad and Ashley comes home to his property. The two migratory patterns-bird and human-are held up for inspection. The south coast of Queensland, now known as the Gold Coast is presented in its pre-world war days as a Paradise before the Fall where man and nature lived in perfect harmony. The characters function more as centres of consciousness except for Imogen Harcourt who made a choice when she migrated from England and knows that she will never return.

Malouf made Italy the setting for his other 1982 novella *Child's Play*, a first person narrative told by a young terrorist preparing to assassinate an internationally acclaimed author. Please note that an interesting analogy can be drawn in connection with Salman Rushdie. Malouf explores the relationship between the ageing writer and his assassin in a way that reveals his abiding fascination with the

nature and possibilities of the imagination, especially the creative imagination Malouf employs the concept of a simultaneous past, present and future. The terrorist in his preparation envisions the near and distant future and his own place in history. What Malouf said of this work holds good for all his novels. "I write out of a strong sense of time and place, a past that is continuously present and of continuities within change."

Harland's Half Acre, Malouf's author novel published in 1984 opens with Frank Harland, the protagonist being with his brothers and father at Killarney, the remnants of a once prosperous farm in the Australian outback. Once again Queensland and Queenslanders are at the heart of the matter. These Harland acres are squandered through drink, gambling, debt and neglect. Frank dreams of restoring the farm to its former glory as described by his father. Working on his talent for drawing, Frank sends his meagre earnings back to the farm. When he eventually becomes famous and prospers he slowly buys back the land that was once part of Killarney. His paintings immortalize the farm. The novel deals with possession-legal and imaginary. When Frank finally gets back the farm there is nobody to leave it to. Finally, half an acre of paintings is all that's left.

The Great World (1990) is a war novel, but it is also a novel of self-knowledge. This novel won the Miles Franklin Award and the Commonwealth Prize for fiction. It covers Australia's experience of the Second World War and its after effects down to 1987. Malouf explains: "The novel is a sort of an epic, rather an anti-epic for it is not about big events but small. (It) is about the use of memory holding together Life. A realistic novel with a great many characters, it is about Australian prisoners of war and of the Japanese who go to Asia to work as coolies. It is about a man who had no education but an extraordinary memory and was the prisoner's memory bank." Thomas Shapcott, a contemporary Australian poet refers to this novel as Malouf's *Tree of Man* (a seminal novel by Patrick White) because like White, Malouf is concerned with the world of the common man. The prisoner of war experience becomes a central metaphor of deprivation. In fact *Fly Away Peter*, *Harland's Half Acre* and *The Great World* are exercises in mapping and naming the salient feature of Australian history from the first decade to the late 1980's. Through Malouf cannot be called a historical novelist, this re-imagining of the past is central to his fictional art. Myth of Australian national life are articulated as the novel covers a period of over seventy years, moving from Sydney's crowded King's Cross to the peaceful backwaters of the Hawkesbury River. The novel renegotiates the ways in which colonial space can be conceived.

Malouf's latest novel *Conversations at Curlow Creek* is set in 1827 in New South Wales. Another re-imagining of Australia's past, the novel is about an escaped convict who is a bushranger (a highwayman). This man is to be hanged in the morning. The man who supervises the hanging spends the night in the hut with him. They discover that they are both Irish. Death, nature, law, justice and injustice are some of its concerns.

2.3 CHRONOLOGY

1934	David Malouf born on 20 March in Brisbane of Lebanese and English parents.
1954	Graduates from University of Queensland
1955	Junior Lecturer in English at University of Queensland
1962	Is published in Four Poets, along with Judith Green, Rodney Hall, and Don Maynard
1963-68	English Master at St. Anselm's College Birkenhead (UK)
1968-78	Senior Tutor, then Lecturer, in English Department at University of Sydney, New South Wales

1970	Publishers first Volume of Poetry, Bicycle and other Poems', in Australia (appears as the year of the Foxes and other Poems in the U.S. in 1979) Publishes first novel, Johnno (released in the U.S. in 1979)	The Author, His Creativity
1974		
1975	Published first novel Johnno (released in the U.S. in 1979)	
1978	Second Novel, An Imaginary life published in both the U.S. (Braziller) and the U.K. (Chatto & Windus)	
1979	An Imaginary life garners the New South Wales Premier's Prize.	
1981	Poetry Volumes First things last and selected Poems.	
1982	Publishes novella Child's Play, along with Eustace and the Prowler. Novella Fly Away Peter (issued in U.S. as the Board of Time to come), set in Queensland before World War I, wins the Age Book of the year Award and, with Child's Play, the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal.	
1984	Releases novel <i>Harland's Half Age</i> .	
1985	Short-story collection Antipodes receives the Victoria Premier's Prize.	
1986	Publishes <i>12, Edmond Stone Street</i> and completes Libretto for Richard Meale's Opera Voss, based on the novel by Australian Nobel Laureate Patrick White. Voss premiers at the Australian Opera.	
1987	Play Blood Relations is named winner of the New South Wales Premier's Prize.	
1990	Publishes novel The Great World (awarded the Commonwealth Writer's prize, the Miles Franklin Award, and the Prize Femina Etranger) and writes Libretto for Meale's Mer de Glace, which premieres at the Australian Opera.	
1993	Novel <i>Remembering Babylon</i> is named by Time as one of the best books of the year, is shortlisted for England's Booker Prize, wins the Los Angeles Times Prize for Fiction, and becomes the first recipient of the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Publisher Opera Libretto Baa Baa Black Sheep.	
1994	Issues selected Poems, 1959-8	
1995	Novel <i>The Conversations at Curlow Creek</i>	
1998	Publishes A Spirit of Play: The Making of Australian Consciousness	
1999	Short-Story Collection Untold Tales	
2000	Selected as Sixteenth Neustadt Prize Laureate (March). Publishes Short-Story Collection Dream Stuff. Awarded Neustadt International Prize for Literature at the University of Oklahoma (October). Austumn issues of world literature today dedicated to Malouf and his work (December) wins Lannan Literary Award for fiction. Publishes Opera Libretto <i>Jane Eyre</i> .	

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2.5 SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

A novel is not just a story. You, the reader, make sense out of the novel by exploring the way that the setting of the book, the plot or story, the characters and the style of the author combine to reveal something of the writer's views about life.

The first chapter of *Remembering Babylon* is central to the subsequent events and ideas of the novel. The narrative sequence in the novel is as follows:

The Author,
His Creativity

- Gemmy's first appearance and its immediate consequences on the white settlement.
- A flashback to sixteen years before Gemmy was washed ashore. He was cared for by the aborigines but is drawn back to white settlement.
- The growing relationship between Gemmy and the white community.
- The exploration of the past life of George Abbot – another flashback.
- Another flashback – an account of the McIvor family in Scotland and in Australia.
- The settlers' different perspectives about how aborigines should be treated and these attitudes effect their approach towards Gemmy.
- Gemmy has lived for five months with the settlers and he represents a treat of their fragile sense of security. This is a flash forward.
- George Abbot's sentimental education begins when he meets Mrs Hutchence and is later introduced to Leona.
- The Aborigines visit Gemmy.
- The rising panic among the whites.
- Some members of the white settlement organise a series of acts of violence against the McIvors for sheltering Gemmy.
- The results of the short meeting between Gemmy and the Aborigines.
- Another flashback to the time when the McIvors first hear of Gemmy's abduction.
- Mr. Frazer's botanizing and his sensitivity to Aboriginal culture.
- Bee keeping at Mrs. Hutchence's place and Janet McIvor's initiation rite into woman hood.
- The horror of Gemmy's early childhood experiences in London – another flashback.
- Lachlan's reclaim to Gemmy and to the attack that follows
- Mr. Frazer's visit to the Governor of Queensland.
- Bushfires and Gemmy's disappearance.
- Fast forward to the first World War and to a meeting between Janet, now a nun and Lachlan, a minister in the Queensland State Government.

2.5.1 Chapter 1

In keeping with the mystical nature of this novel (connect this with the last three paragraphs in chapter 20) Gemmy's first appearance to the children is like a supernatural revelation. 'He seems to spring out of 'the no-man's land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome... of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dar''(p3). He seems not quite human, half-way between a bird and a human being Lachlan (Jock McIvor's nephew) first thinks he is aboriginal, but his fair hair and the shreds of clothing on him proclaim his nationality. Gemmy balances briefly on the top rail of the fence, his arms spread out and shouts the amazing words: 'Do not shoot, I am a B-b British object!' revealing his origins and the fact that he has not spoken his language for a long time. This first appearance of Gemmy suggests the dichotomy of margins and periphery in the politicisations of space in the novel. It also indicates the novel's liminal nature – the suggestion that boundaries are man-made and tend to both exclude and include.

Lachlan immediately assumes authority and prods Gemmy in the back with his stick, which Gemmy has mistaken for a gun, and marches him off like a prisoner to his uncle Jock.

The settlers see Gemmy's arrival as a heaven sent distraction to the monotony of their lives. They are mostly ignorant, fearful people, trying to make a living out of the Queensland bush, refugees from the wretched poverty of the working class of the

British Isles: They are afraid of the strange land with its unpredictable climate of floods and cyclones and searing heat. Even greater is their dread of the aborigines. The settlers' reaction is to use a shotgun to keep them at bay. Their reaction to the land is to strip it, to make it more like home.

Gemmy faces the assembled settlers and their children. With gestures and scraps of language which he can recall, Gemmy helps them to discover some of his past. Common words start to erupt from the recesses of his memory. He utters them with delight, angering Hee Gosper as he seizes Hee's hammer to show that he knows its name. The next afternoon, the two educated members of the colony, the minister, Mr. Frazer, a sensitive and compassionate man, and the pretentious schoolmaster, young George Abbot, try to make a written account of Gemmy's life which finally runs to seven closely written pages, Gemmy cannot read the account but when he handles the pages, he feels that some magic has drained from him and captured his life. He wonders how he can contrive to steal the papers back from Mr. Frazer. The memory of the life he has lost begins to return to him.

2.5.2 Chapter 2

This chapter begins with a lyrical description of Gemmy's discovery by a group of Aboriginal women and children when he is washed ashore. Malouf's poetic sensibility is at work here. After emerging from the delirium of fever, Gemmy is saddened not to see Willett, the London rat-catcher, with whom he lived, scroched from the fire which Gemmy had lit before he had run away and been forced to join the crew of the ship.

With the street child's determination to survive and his quick wit, Gemmy makes a place for himself in the tribe, quickly learning their language and customs and forgetting his own. He becomes one of their legends and hears them tell his story.

"How, when they found him he had been still half-child, half sea-calf, his hair swarming with spirits in the shape of tiny phosphorescent crabs, his mouth stopped with coral; how ashpale and ghostly in his little white shirt, that long ago had rotted like a caul, he had resin up in the firelight and danced, and changed before their eyes from a sea-creature into a skinny human child" (p.27)

At the same time, Gemmy is aware that there is another part of his life, a secret story which must be told in the language he has temporarily lost. The tribe believe that when Gemmy becomes a man he will give up his other world which still troubles his dreams. Gemmy is convinced that he will return to his old life with Willett but it doesn't happen that way. He is recalled to life among the white settlers and then has sudden flashes of memory: the sight of houses, clothes on a line, a man chopping wood with an axe. These moments help him to recover some words of the language he has lost. The most powerful of all these memories returns when Gemmy watches Ellen McIvor (Jack's wife) throw out scraps of food to her geese and Gemmy tastes these scraps. He is reduced to tears. At night, the speech of the McIvor's draws him like a magnet:

"If he could get the words inside him, as he had the soaked mush, the creature, or spirit or whatever it was, would come upto the surface of him and take them. It was the words he had to get hold of. It was the words that would recognise get hold of. He did not want to be taken back. What he wanted was to be recognised." (p.32)

The next day when Gemmy runs towards the children, he is drawn, almost despite himself, by his desire to recapture his hidden self and the language in which it must be expressed.

2.5.3 Chapter 3

This chapter describes the developing relationship between Gemmy and the white community. He brings out the best or worst that each person is capable of. He lives with the McIvor family, not because of any decision by Jock McIvor's but because of his wife Ellen's compassion. Their children, Janet and Meg and their nephew Lachlan, become Gemmy's friends. He plays with them and teaches them some of the skills he has learnt from the aborigines. Although there is affection between Lachlan and Gemmy, Lachlan, still a child, establishes his dominance, Gemmy is his man. Janet loves Gemmy and accepts him even though she may never know certain aspects of his life. Gemmy returns Ellen's tenderness with little acts of kindness. Jock is awkward with Gemmy. He fears that the others will turn against him for sheltering Gemmy. He feels that his mateship with the other settlers is threatened.

Ned Corcoran, a man who forces his children to steal from his neighbours, leads the campaign of hatred and suspicion against Gemmy. He suggests that Gemmy could be in league with the blacks. Gemmy represents for Ned "all the abominations" of the aborigines. One of the most sinister aspects of Gemmy is that he has apparently lost most of the language he spoke as a child. Even his physical appearance and his smell have been changed by due to his long stay with his time with the aborigines. The horror which the white settlers associate with the blacks seems to have rubbed off on Gemmy and they fear him too:

"It brought you slap up against a terror you thought you had learned, years back, to treat as childish: the Bogey, the Coal man, Absolute Night, and now here it is, not two yards away, solid and breathing..."(p.42)

This is a powerful expression of fear that these limited people feel towards the unknown, in the dark history of the world and in their own minds. Gemmy becomes the symbol of this fear.

2.5.4 Chapter 4

This chapter contains an exploration of the past life of George Abbot, the unpopular nineteen year old school master. George has become a teacher in the Australian outback almost by chance and when the story begins, he is drowning in a sea of hatred and self loathing. He is an unsympathetic bully to his pupils, who is only interested in maintaining his authority.

George is the only boy in a poor Scottish family. On the death of his father, an eccentric cousin, Alisdair Robertson, his wealthy, godfather, takes over the responsibility for George's education and his upkeep. But as he grows cousin Alisdair loses interest in him.

After acquiring a degree George visits his cousin to thank him and reveals that he would like to be a missionary and explorer in Africa. Cousin Alisdair does not listen. Instead he talks of the golden opportunities in Australia, 'that other and rival graveyard' (p50) to Africa. The implication is that if George agrees, his godfather will provide for the family and see that his sisters have sufficient dowry to marry well. The greyness of George's despair extends over the country of his exile and over its inhabitants, both black and white. To Abbot, Gemmy is part of the degeneracy of the aborigines. He antagonises his most favourite pupil Lachlan by scorning his attachment to Gemmy.

2.5.5 Chapter 5

Here we have an account of the McIvor family in Scotland and in Australia. Ellen Beathie came from the Scottish mining town of Airdrie, near Glasgow. Her father and four brothers were miners and it is well known that working in mines can be

back-breaking as well as dangerous. Ellen feels that her brothers are brutalised by their harsh life in a bleak mining town. They are coarse, drunken and given to fights. It is one of her brothers who brings Jock home after a game of football. Jock, in contrast to her brothers, is tall and fair. He works as a gardener on a big estate. Ellen is attracted to him and they marry and emigrate to Australia. When Ellen's brother Rob, Lachlan's father, is killed in a mining accident, Ellen and Jock agree to take in Lachlan.

Their daughters, Janet and Meg are delighted to hear of their cousin's imminent arrival. Janet idealises her parent's life in Scotland. She considers it a kind of dream time, having more richness and meaning than the rural life in Australia. This cousin who was coming would bring some of that with him. He would still have its light upon him, alive and actual. He would still have its speech in his mouth (pp. 54-5).

But Lachlan is arrogant and touchy. As a protection against his feeling of dislocation, he appears to scorn their life in the bush. Janet makes fun of his accent and his life back in Scotland, even though this life in the old land is a part of her dreams. Lachlan retaliates by talking to Ellen in Scottish dialect, which the girls cannot understand. Lachlan's sense of self-preservation soon helps him to come to terms with the life in the harsh outback. He becomes a useful member of the community and a skilful hunter and tracker. He thrives and matures, developing a vision of his own role in the new land.

Janet realises the difference between her future and Lachlan's. She is discouraged by its limitations. She sees the monotony and hardship of her mother's life and longs for a world that is 'larger, more passionate, crueller – even that would be a comfort – than the one she (was) bound to' (p. 58). In a significant passage in the text she discovers under the lemon tree scab on her knee:

'another skin, lustrous as pearl. A delicate pink, it might have belonged to some other creature altogether, and the thought came to her that if all the rough skin of her present self crusted and came off, what would be revealed, shining in sunlight, was this finer being that has somehow been covered up in her'. (p. 59).

Janet keeps these moments of introspection to herself. Lachlan, on the other hand, shares his visions. With Gemmy's assistance and knowledge of survival in the bush he boasts that he will make famous explorations, even discovering the bones of Ludering Leichhardt - the explorer who also inspired Patrick White's novel *Voss*. Gemmy is moved by these visions and assumes a protective attitude towards Lachlan. It is one of the few occasions when Gemmy realises himself to be a young man.

2.6 THE REMAINING CHAPTERS

Having taken you through the **first five chapters of the novel**, I would like you to read the remaining chapters and look for the following points. Note down any of the phrases or sentences you might like to refer to later.

In Chapter 6 you will encounter the different views on the aborigines. These attitudes of the White settlers will affect their behaviour towards Gemmy. Make a list of these attitudes. For e.g. Ned Corcoran believes that genocide is the only solution. A second group want to know the details of Gemmy's life with the aborigines. On page 65 you will find an interesting paragraph on how the settlers react to Gemmy's explanations. They find them obscure! 'There were no words for it in their tongue.'

Look for the part which stresses the genuine trust that develops between Gemmy and the minister, Mr. Frazer. This points to another attitude towards the aborigines or the

first Australians. On page 68 there is an interesting passage which tells you how the aborigines reacted to the presence of Mr. Frazer. Later in Chapter 14 you will read of Mr. Frazer's reaction to this new land.

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As time passes note how the settlers' fragile sense of security is undermined by what Gemmy represents. Even Jock views Gemmy with fear and suspicion. Read the passage on page 74 which tells you about Ellen's initial attraction towards Jock. She had associated the young Jock with 'sunlight and space' and is appalled at the effect this harsh landscape has had on him. Note the yearning for home that relates to the theme of exile. Ellen too represents the community's fear of the unknown in her attempt to establish "the precarious order" to keep away this fear (page 80).

Consider how Malouf builds up a picture of the young schoolmaster George Abbott. Mrs. Hutchence succeeds in taking him down a peg or two by ignoring his intellectual status. George, who is attracted to Mrs. Hutchence's young companion, Leona Gonzales is made to feel that the whole world has been changed (page 93). Notice Gemmy's suspicion and fear of the schoolmaster. It was George who captured his past life in the magic writing of the school room.

One of the most significant events in the novel is that of the two aborigines who visit Gemmy one afternoon as he is planking a shed for Jock. This is observed by Andy McKillop, an untrustworthy farmhand, one of life's losers. Andy invents the existence of a magic stove which the aborigines have given to Gemmy. On page 100 Andy's motives are clearly stated. Yet Andy had used the aborigines to suit his own purposes. Andy's story and the hysteria it arouses spread like a bushfire.

Make a note of all the events that reveal the rising panic in the community starting with Barney Mason's visit to Jock McIvor. Why do the settlers suddenly rely on the testimony of a worthless man like Andy? Notice how Jock is gradually being isolated for his association with Gemmy. Page 110 to 111 are significant in assessing how Jock comes to terms with this situation. They reveal a new sense of intimacy with Ellen as they share feelings of loneliness in Australia. In this new land there is an 'absence of ghosts' (p. 110).

Violence in this small settler community escalates. Make a list of the acts of violence organised by Ned Corcoran and Andy McKillop. Can the McIvors or Gemmy hope for justice? Remember this is the outback, the frontier and the forces of justice are miles away in Bowen which in turn depends on the advice from a little Island in another hemisphere - Britain.

Notice the shifts in points of view as the narrative returns to the conversation between Gemmy and the aborigines and its consequences. On page 118 Gemmy explains his sense of loss. His vitality has been spent. He no longer feels a oneness with the land and creatures. Why is this so? What triggers off this introspection in Gemmy? What other memories are also triggered? Keep in mind the first word of the novel's title. It is now Gemmy's turn to remember.

Read chapter 13 in detail and see how flashback is used as an effective technique for the process of 'remembering', to reveal how it can be both a nightmare as well as a consolation. A violent incident brings the McIvors closer and renews their bond of affection, teaching them to reach out to Gemmy in spite of impending social disgrace.

Gemmy's stay with Mrs. Hutchence is arranged for his protection. He helps her by building hives for her bee-keeping. There is a significance in Janet's interest in bee-keeping. On page 142 Janet has an unusual experience which determines her vocation in life. What is it? Why does Janet feel that she has been "drawn into the process and mystery of things"? (p. 143). Would you consider this episode as a renewal of Janet's self? Remember that such episodes or moments of revelation have

been referred to as moments of epiphany. Do you think that this experience of Janet is one such moment?

Gemmy's act of remembering or recalling his past continues in Chapter 16. The terror of the attack at the McIvor's house and his displacement to Mrs. Hutchence's have bring back memories of past agonies to Gemmy. These memories are important in order to reconstruct Gemmy's miserable, exploited life in industrial London of the nineteenth century. Why does Gemmy want to get hold of the magic sheets from the school house where details of his life were recorded?

On Pages 164-165 Lachlan too has a moment of epiphany when he looks back to see Gemmy watching him as they part, never to meet again. It is the memory of the end of a friendship which recurs as a poignant moment of loss throughout Lachlan's life.

The other character who tries his best to reconcile himself to the land and its environment is Mr. Frazer. He makes an important move in Chapter 18 to acquaint the Governor of Queensland, Sir, George Bowen and the Premier, Sir, (Robert) Herbert with his belief that White settlers should use the natural resources of the land, not destroy them. He is also concerned about the fate of Gemmy. As I have said earlier David Malouf is interested in re-imaging the history of Australia. Here is a reference to two real people, the Governor and the Premier, both highly qualified from British Universities, but both shown to be more interested in their own careers rather than in reconciliation measures. Sir George shows little interest in what Mr. Frazer has to say. His meeting with the Premier is equally unproductive. The ironical outcome is a letter from the Premier offering poor illiterate Gemmy the post of Customs Officer for the port of Bower.

There is another point that you must make a note of as you read and respond to this novel and that is the references to bushfires. Fire is an important image, frequently used in the novel and reaches, frequently used in the novel reaches symbolic proportions. You can make a note of the various references to fire, flames and so on to understand the significance and Malouf's repeated use of it. Chapter 19 begins with a description of a bushfire. What do you think this signifies? Note the attitudes of some of the other characters towards Gemmy. Why is Gemmy disappointed? Why does he take away those composition exercises sheets? Where is the original account of Gemmy's life? Do you notice a change in the schoolmaster, George Abbot? Is he still arrogant and uncaring? What does Gemmy remember as he heads towards the swamp? Why is Gemmy heading towards the swamp? *Look for answers on pages 180-181.*

Now that you've progressed to the last chapter of the novel, Chapter 20, reading and interpreting what you have read you will notice that there is a sudden time leap. The story fast forwards to the First World War. From the mid-nineteenth century we are catapulted into the early twentieth. You will be familiar with this kind of telescoping of history as you would have encountered this technique in Shakespeare's historical plays.

Janet is now a nun whose name is sister Monica in the convent of St. Iona's, Wynnum and Lachlan is a Minister in the Queensland Government. Why did Janet get in touch with Lachlan? What effect did Lachlan's effort to help Janet have on his career? Do you see a parallel with the earlier events in the novel? The act of remembering continues when Janet and Lachlan recall their recent past. Tragedy haunts Lachlan as he remembers the death of his grandson Willie killed on the war front. They remember the coming of Gemmy as "someone we loved" (p.194). There is a sense of release at this final acknowledgement of love. Though the word reconciliation is not mentioned, it is a keyword for this Cathartic final chapter. After all, this novel was published in 1993, the year of reconciliation between whites and blacks. They accept the fact of Gemmy's violent death.

When Janet is alone, watching the sea come in over the mud flats, her memories of the past blend into a vision of the future in Australia. The moon illuminates this final moment of epiphany. The tide which rises seems like a symbol of hope and love.

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“Out beyond the flatlands, the line of light pulses and swells. The sea, in sight now, ruffles, accelerates. Quickly now it is rising towards us, it approaches.

As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach one another. It glows in fullness till the tide is high and the light almost, but not quite, unbearable, as the moon plucks at our world and all the waters of the earth ache towards it, and the light, running in fast now, reaches the edges of the shore, just so far in its order, and all the muddy margin of the bay is alive, and in a line of running fire all the outline of the vast continent appears, in touch now with its other life.” (P.200)

2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have talked about the creativity of David Malouf. Also, we have given you the summary of the novel.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the opening of the novel.
2. Critically analyse the last four chapters of the novel.
3. Discuss the main writings of David Malouf.
4. Write a note on the bibliography of Malouf
5. Analyse the biographical details of Malouf.

UNIT 3 STRUCTURE, CHARACTERS AND METAPHORS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
 - 1.1 Introduction
 - 1.2 Structure and Characters
 - 1.3 Metonyms, Metaphors, and Epiphanies
 - 1.4 The Concluding chapter
 - 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
 - 1.6 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will mainly discuss the structure of the novel, the characters, the metonyms, the epiphanies and the metaphors.

3.2 STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERS

In *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf moves farther back in Australian history than before – to the mid-nineteenth century. His story of a pioneering settlement near Bowen in North Queensland provides a rich context for him to continue his rewriting of Australia's national mythologies, again addressing the accompanying question of cultural identity. *Remembering Babylon* offers a reprise of the myth of exile, first explored fifteen years earlier in *An Imaginary Life*, but also deals with the colonial myths of pioneering and frontier settlement, myths that in their original versions were silent about the violent dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants, and marked by a failure to realise that the 'Old Country' could not be remade in this new place.

In this Unit will discuss Malouf's exploration of post-colonial concerns as a central focus of the novel. This exploration is conducted principally through developing the symbolic force of the chief protagonist, as well as through the familiar themes of the enabling hybrid (more developed here than previously), of the primacy of language as both a constructive and restrictive agent, and of the necessity to reconnect the cultural with the natural. The primacy of language is in this novel reinforced throughout by a cluster of metonyms related to the mouth.

In his analysis of *An Imaginary Life*, Gareth Griffiths concludes that "concerns such as linguistic displacement, physical exile, cross-culturality and authenticity or inauthenticity of experience are among the features which one might identify as characteristically post-colonial."¹ *Remembering Babylon* is more overtly engaged with post-colonial concerns than *An Imaginary Life*, and it addresses and reflects these concerns in three main ways: by remaking the pioneer myth of frontier settlement so as to reveal the myth's flaws; by evoking again the themes of accident, fragmentation, ambiguity and open-endedness; and by deploying again the ideas and metaphors of post-romantic aesthetic, sometimes in an attempt to achieve a resolution.

The three elements do not always coexist easily. Even as Malouf attempts to distance himself from colonial ways of interpreting the world, for example, he cannot avoid reinscribing them to some extent; and his reminders of the provisionality and randomness of existence can be seen as conflicting with his essentialist recourse to the fundamentals of an enduring and universal Nature. One of the most interesting

aspects of *Remembering Babylon* is that it reveals so clearly the tension between a familiar yearning for a state of completeness and connection – for a transcendence beyond space, time and language – and an awareness that politics and history frame and define us inescapably through language.

The central figure in the novel (this is the first Malouf novel not to have dual chief characters) is Gemmy Fairley. At the age of thirteen he is thrown overboard while ill off the coast of Queensland, then rescued by Aborigines, with whom he lives for sixteen years. Hearing that there are white settlers living in the south, he seeks them out, sensing that the key to some troubled part of him lies with the different language. He approaches three children – Lachlan Beattie and his cousins Janet and Meg McIvor. Lachlan, who seems best able to communicate with Gemmy, “captures” him, and the McIvors take him in. Most of the settlers, however, find Gemmy’s presence strongly unsettling, and become antagonistic to the McIvors, especially when some “blacks” appear on Jock McIvor’s land and Gemmy is seen speaking familiarly to them. That Jock resists this peer pressure as long as he does in such an isolated place is a testament to the heroism exhibited by “ordinary” people, and is contrasted later in the novel with the pompous ambitions of the governing class. There is no climax to this escalating tension: Gemmy disappears; and his fate is never really known. The novel ends with the reunion approximately sixty years later of Lachlan and Janet, who is now a nun. The plot is unpredictable and the characters elusive – Gemmy is not the only character to disappear from the story. The structure is also fragmented, combining lyrical sections with portions of historical saga and even a chapter of sustained comic satire. Such inconclusiveness and fragmentation support the post-colonial theme in the novel by failing to provide neat and reassuring verities about colonial settlement and the growth of the nation.

Gemmy’s mythical significance is an amalgam of the wild child, the *enfant sauvage* from *An Imaginary Life*, and the Lost Child of Australian art and literature. The Lost Child typically wanders innocently away into the hostile bush, never to be seen again, thereby underlining the settlers’ sense of vulnerability in an alien and unforgiving land. But in *Remembering Babylon*, a revisionist fable, the myth is reversed; the child is found, demonstrating the possibility of survival in the new environment. Gemmy returns to white culture; not out of rejection of the Aboriginal culture he is now more familiar with, but to solve a puzzle, to reclaim a partially remembered, partially lost past, and in order to complete himself.

Watching a man in a clearing about to chop wood, Gemmy recovers the word “axe”² and this fragment from his first language propels him to discover more. The next day he approaches a group of children, seeking to prove that “all that separated him from them was ground that could be covered” (33). In the context of the narrative as a whole, these words carry wide metaphorical reverberations, though in view of Gemmy’s ultimate rejection by the bulk of the settlers it seems that the space between the two cultures, inscribed with conflicting values, cannot yet easily be “covered”. Mr Frazer, the settlers’ minister, comes to perceive that it is only someone like Gemmy who is capable of “covering” this space, who could yet be the key to a possible future resolution of the conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. Gemmy’s symbolic force is as a subversive, post-colonial figure, a hybrid who combines both indigenous and European perspectives and knowledge, and who is for some a catalyst of change.

Gemmy has emerged from the dark Other of the bush surrounding the embryonic settlement – an Other the settlers do not see except through their understandably still Eurocentric eyes (what Mr Frazer calls “their English eyes”) (130). He has come from:

the no-man’s-land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents’ too, of nightmare, rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark (3).

The phrase "savage and fearsome" refers principally to the indigenous inhabitants, demonised, dehumanised, and conflated with the natural environment, like bush-fires or snakes. There are many allusions to the violent suppression of the Aborigines in the novel, including Lachlan's first reaction to Gemmy's arrival:

A black! That was the boy's first thought...

Very sturdy and purposeful, two paces in front of his cousins... and with a belief in the power of the weapon he held that he knew was impossible and might not endure, he pushed the stick into his shoulder and took his stance...

'Do not shoot,' it shouted (2-3)

Here Malouf combines an evocation of the invaders' murderous violence with a near-parody of seductive and popular tales about the brave boy of the Empire, which extended well into the twentieth century.³ It is equally telling that before Gemmy's appearance, Lachlan has been playing a game in the dusty paddock in which he imagines himself hunting in the snow for wolves. The girls, especially Janet, reject the game since "they had no experience of snow, and wolves did not interest them" (1). But Lachlan insists, because in his mind the fictional European landscape is more real than the baked earth around him. The scene also suggests the power of the imagination – a power the settlers will eventually have to use if they are to remap this new geography and make it their own.

For while Malouf is critical, even satirical, of the settlers' failures, he is also sympathetic to those who faced what seemed an "impenetrable dark" (8):

It was disturbing, that: to have unknown country behind you as well as in front.... what you were left with when the last sleeper settled was the illimitable night, where it lay close over the land. You lay listening to the crash of animals through its underbrush, the crack, like a snapped bone, of a ringbarked tree out in a paddock, then its muffled fall; or some other, unidentifiable sound, louder, further off, that was an event in the land's history; no part of yours. The sense then of being submerged, of being hidden away in the Depths of the country, but also lost, was very strong (9).

They are all lost children, and another lost child has come to show them they cannot only survive, but belong. For most of them, however, Gemmy only articulates their fears and threatens their fragile sense of identity. The townsfolk's negative reaction recalls that of the people to Tomis, who are also living at the edge of an empire, to the Child in *An Imaginary Life*, as characterised by Gareth Griffiths:

For those at the colonising edge it is imperative that they define themselves by creating the wild as savage, and other, as something which must be resisted and destroyed since, once allowed in, it will possess and transform their already fragile identification with a centre to which they constantly aspire without ever quite possessing.⁴

Malouf stresses the sense of exile from the "centre" that oppresses several of his main characters. Abbott had aspired to make his way in exotic Africa, where he would embrace "hardship" without "illusions" (49); instead he has been sent to Australia, which he despises. Ironically, it is largely the tropical climate, not dissimilar to the "Dark Continent", that so oppresses him: "in all its forms clammy and insidiously sweet – lushness and quick bloom followed by a dark putrescence" (51). But the real disappointment lies in Australia's failure to measure up to the romantic notions he has formed of Africa and empire from his "Sunday school stories" and readings of the explores like Dr. Livingstone. Janet McIvor is also oppressed by the idealised

image of a place she has never been – Scotland: “There were times when she felt helpless against a place which, as her parents evoked it in every word they uttered, belonged so much more strongly to all the highest emotions in her than the place she was in” (55). Authenticity cannot possibly belong to the place she knows; her parents’ accent, their phrasing prevent it. She too is trapped by language.

As the bizarre figure of Gemmy teeters on the “boundary fence” (2) between the bush and the children, the symbolism is clear; he stands on the boundary that for the settlers means ownership and the limit of the domesticated, and the exclusion of the unknown beyond. But it is potentially an enabling boundary as well. As Bill Ashcroft has commented, the fence “represents the margin of language and culture but also a way of defining the world. And it is the possible liberation from the way of defining the world which Gemmy represents.”⁵ Such a possibility of transformation and liberation is not grasped by most of the settlers. Gemmy’s presence threatens to break down the comfortable absolutes of what it means to be non-Aboriginal, or authentic, or even human rather than animal. He upsets the reassuring binary division of white and black, civilised and savage, constituting an anomalous category in between. He has an ease with the natural environment, but also, it becomes increasingly clear, a facility with the English language. His first words, “Do not shoot. I am a B-b-british object!”, are allowing for the comic irony, accurate. By using and so re-entering the language of the colonisers, he has been deprived of his agency as a subject, and become a passive object, defined by the gaze of Empire.

But once inside white discourse again. Gemmy is able to represent an ambiguous and destabilising position in the settlement: “It was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing to them, since at any moment he could show one face or the other” (43). For himself, Gemmy is both empowered by his recovered original language, and painfully limited, as when his life story is with comic absurdity extracted and transcribed by Mr Frazer and the school teacher, George Abbot. The power of non-Aboriginal Australians to write the history of the country, including its indigenous people, is parodied here in “the minister’s Colonial fairytale” (19), with all its “gaps of memory”, “dislocation” and distortion due to preconceptions (16). With another touch of the irony that pervades the novel, Gem has learned to speak five languages while living with the tribe (40) – we know his linguistic facility far surpasses that of the rough settlers who mock him – and it is only in English that he stammers.

Gemmy is taken in by the McIvors, and this act of kindness causes a schism between the family and its neighbours. The shambling, eager-to-please interloper undermines the comfort of a racial binary:

He had started out white. No question. When he fell in with the at thirteen, was it? – he had been like any other child, one of their own... But had he remained white?

...you had to put to yourself the harder question. Could you lose it? Not just language, but it. It (40).

Jock’s mateship with his neighbours is seriously shaken by his loyalty to Gemmy, whom he defends out of a sense of fairness. Gemmy has been the catalyst in making Jock question his unexamined sharing of values with his mates: “He had begun lately to be critical, even of Jim Sweetman” (73). Later when some Aborigines visit Gemmy, and he is clearly at ease with them, the neighbours put even greater pressure on Jock to shelter Gemmy no longer, causing Jock to reflect that “he too had been shaken in these last months: not by what Gemmy threatened but by what he had begun to see in others” (103). The theme of Gemmy as agent of change is not a subtle one, but it is effective in the detailed nuances Malouf pursues of social conformity and cohesion at odds with a more complex and difficult sense of justice or

balance, of the "sociable self, communal warmth" at odds with an existentially "alone" authentic self (106-107).

Jock's awareness of his self-transformation and heightened individuality is most accurate in a moment of epiphany, in which he experiences an intense openness to nature, similar to the Heideggerian *Being-in-the-world*:

It was as if he had seen the world till now, not through his own eyes, out of some singular self, but through the eyes of a fellow who was always in company, even when he was alone...

Wading through waist-high grass, he was surprised to see all the tips beaded with green, as if some new growth had come into the world that till now he had never seen or heard of.

When he looked closer it was hundreds of wee bright insects Iridescent, and the discovery of them, the new light they brought To the scene, was a lightness in him ... like a form of knowledge he Had broken through to. It was unnameable, which disturbed him, But was also exhilarating; for a moment he was entirely happy (106-107)

In the Maloufian "special moment", Romantic resolution of the conflict between individual and collective, between subject and object, is temporarily achieved; and again, as in *An Imaginary Life*, the moment is linked with an intimation of progressive change. Jock's transformation, through Gemmy's agency, suggests a post-colonial inflection on Ovid's words that are just as apposite to the later novel: "It is our self we are making out there, and when the landscape is complete we shall have become the gods who are intended to fill it."⁶

Jock's self-transformation, through Gemmy's agency, occurs in a timeless realm outside language, and raises the related themes of language and communication, especially the Maloufian paradox that language can be both powerful and limiting "he could have found no form to communicate [his new awareness], outside words" (108). The contradiction is that though these epiphanies occur without/beyond language, or more accurately, in the higher form of language that is silence, as described by Ovid: "the true language, I know now, is that speech in silence in which we first communicated, the Child and I, in the forest, when I was asleep,"⁷ all other meaning depends on the social imbeddedness of language. This imbeddedness is exemplified when Gemmy is interrogated by the settlers about the whereabouts of his tribe, and realises that he can tell them very little of the tribe's reality because the settlers do not inhabit the same language (and therefore inhabit a different landscape): "... a good deal of what [the settlers] were after he could not have told, even if he had wanted to, for the simple reason that there were no words for it in their tongue"(65).

And yet it is the "true language" of silence which is free of cultural discourse – a discourse hegemonically controlled in the colonies by the empire's governing class – and which therefore might empower the post-colonial "voice":

Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical Structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which Conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established. Such Power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice."

Gemmy's voice is either silenced or misunderstood or misinterpreted. Even the benevolent Mr Frazer, Gemmy's advocate, has only a limited success in "hearing" Gemmy during their outings in the bush to name flora and fauna. Mr. Frazer's relationship to the bush is mediated by a nineteenth-century scientific drive to "botanise" (66); he uses language to categorise and separate, whereas Gemmy uses it to connect: "he was sensitive to this dealing between name and spirit" (67). Gemmy

is also subject to this categorising of plants and places in the sense that his Aboriginal enculturation makes distinctions between "men's business" and "women's business"; but this is represented by Malouf as "reverence", as more desirable than scientific detachment. Moreover, such a spiritual interpretation of the land enables Gemmy to have a closer communication with it, a closer connection through his senses:

Structure, Characters and Metaphors

So when he and the minister ... trudged up a rocky, sun-scorched slope to where they could see, north and west, all the country he was at home in, he was moving through a world that was alive for him and dazzling; some of it even in the deepest shade throwing off luminous flares, so that he had to squint and cover his eyes, and all of it crackling and creaking and swelling and bursting with growth; but he cast the light only in patches for Mr Frazer, leaving the rest undisclosed (67-68).

Gemmy, the hybrid and harbinger of a possible future connection with the land, can only indicate the right direction for Mr. Frazer who, like the explorers, is blind to much that he is "mapping" or "writing" on these small expeditions. As in the epiphanies of Jock and Janet, there is in these scenes a stress on light and brightness (contrasting with the "Absolute dark"), and on the importance of being open, via one's senses and body. Malouf has commented on this latter Motif:

I think of myself and almost all the writing – as beginning somehow with the body, in a sensual way; with a strong sense of where the body is, its compactness, and where it impinges on the world around it. I suppose that's why I get led so often into notion of mapping, of space, and boundaries."

It is implied that, like other white liberals – to use contemporary terminology – Mr Frazer benignly and indiscriminately regards the indigenous people as part of the flora and fauna: "Even when they were meant to be seen, he did not distinguish them from the surrounding vegetation or the play of light and shadow between the leaves" (68). More clearly, both the Aborigines and the land accept Gemmy but resist his companion:

As for what the blacks would be seeing, Gemmy knew [he] would have a clear light around him... It came from the energy set off where his spirit touched the spirits he was moving through.

All they would see of Mr Frazer was what the land itself saw: a shape, thin, featureless, that interposed itself a moment, like a mist or cloud, before the land blazed out in its full strength again and the shadow as gone, as if, in the long history of the place, it was too slight to endure, or had never been.

Mr Frazer's and Abbott's "writing" of Gemmy is more serious in its well-meaning failure; its attempt to pin Gemmy down is as clumsy as a butterfly collection. Their attempt to record his life history has the "facts... all out of their proper order, and with so many gaps of memory and with so much dislocation" caused by the limitations of language and the interpolation of the recorders' own values and assumptions (16). This incident reflects on the failure of conventional white history, with its attempts at grand connections and unifying generalisations. Malouf, thus, emphasises that his project is not to provide another Australian literary saga, and he places in context the later disappearance from his narrative of Gemmy and the McIvors, the fragmentation of the novel's plot, timeline and genre. Localised moments can be more reliably recorded. But Fraser's and Abbot's inaccurate history of Gemmy also incorporates him into a white colonial discourse that threatens to make him regress to the time when he was a miserable slave as "Willett's Boy" (150) in the industrial European city, or the two years he spent bullied and abused at sea:

These visions that dragged him back and racked his body with the reliving of what he had already endured a first time, left him weak and shaken... He began to sicken, and saw at last that what he was suffering here had to do with the sheets of paper where, months ago, Mr Frazer and the school master had set down his life (154).

Gemmy is reduced to a kind of shadow by the seven pages of writing, until he has almost lost his connection with the "earth" (176) – "lost all weight in the world". He sets out to retrieve the sheets from the schoolteacher before they "draw him to his death", and having retrieved them, the process of his disintegration halts. As he walks through a part of the bush blackened by fire, it begins to rain, and the word "water" comes to him, allowing him to re-enter the landscape, much as the word "poppy" had rescued Ovid: "he was walking now in a known landscape; all the names of things, as he met them, even in their ashen form, shone on his breath, sprang up in their real lives about him" (181). In the presence of fire and earth ("charred earth") and water, the fundamentals of Nature, he is metaphorically freed from the slavery of the sheets of paper, the false history, and is in harmony with the land again. He is also literally freed, as the rain washes away the writing and dissolves the paper. But it is not one of his five Aboriginal languages that allows him to "know" the "landscape" here once more: it is the English word "water". Gemmy is empowered by his hybrid concept in previous novels – the hybrid not only defies boundaries but, like the image of metamorphosis, it signifies change, and therefore empowerment.

3.5 METONYMS, METAPHORS, AND EPIPHANIES

The way the word comes to him, "a drop of moisture sizzled on his tongue", is one example of the frequent use of metonyms for language in the novel; the references to "tongue", "mouth", "lips" and especially "breath" are so numerous that they far exceed the use of any motif in earlier novels. Gemmy's reconnection with the landscape is prefigured, for example in the first third of the novel by his thought that "there was no way of existing in this land... unless you took into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked up all the various parts of it and made them one" (65). In the way Malouf creates a metaphorical sub-text which indirectly reinforces the theme that land and language and self are parts of the same process. The scenes of Jock's and Janet's epiphanies are written without using these terms, which is appropriate given that the scenes attempt to describe an experience beyond language.

That human language is not always adequate is brought home to Mr. Frazer when, after this unsatisfactory dinner with the Governor and Premier, he releases he has not understood the nuances of cultured and bureaucratic social discourse: "He was astonished. Had he made himself so unclear?" (175) He fails to communicate with the administrators partly because of an ideological gulf. The two rulers of this "colonial democracy" (172) do not share Mr Frazer's recognition of the need to accept this new land in its own terms. Governor Brisbane sees Queensland as a blank page, "mere rocks and air" (168), and his mission is "creating spaces where history may now occur". He has to "call into existence a new self-governing state", but his idea of making a new place is to mimic classical forms, constructing a culture on the ancient and already outdated European model, "all classical allusion and analogy." "Analogy is his drug", Malouf repeats on the next page, commenting on the Governor's letter "home" to England in which he writes: "How refreshing among my daily cares are these classical analogies" (169). Only through this cultural filter, comically grandiose, can the Governor manage intermittently to mask his disappointment at the "dispiriting bushland of the opposing shore" (171), "opposing" in more ways than one. Malouf succeeds in presenting this concise picture of myopic colonial bureaucracy through a satirical mode but ridicules ambitious, complacent,

Eurocentric colonialism. Mr Frazer's eminently sensible scheme of accommodation to this tropical place, by growing native produce rather than exotics, is ignored by his hosts. The Premier bathes in the praise of Lady Bowen for the temperate fruit like peaches and grapes that he grows at his property, and the "peacocks and pheasants" (174), as well as in the sexual double entendre of his and Lady Bowen's talk of strawberries and asparagus (173). The motif of the machine, familiar from other Malouf novels, returns as she gushes over Mr. Herbert's "machine for making ice." The machine motif is ambivalent in Malouf, and can negate nature, or operate in the service of it: the latter meaning is evident in this case. Mr. Frazer is defeated by all this "speaking in code", but Nature is still triumphant: though Lady Bowen induces a "cosy torpor" with her piano playing and exotic singing "in a sweet Italian voice" (174), Nature invades the sitting room with mock violence reminiscent of the neo-classical Alexander Pope:

Suddenly there is an explosion in the room. Lady Bowen has slapped her forearm, a smudge of crimson appears there, the rich blood of the Candianos, which she stares at a moment – they all do – as if she had not expected it to be quite so scarlet or so abundant. She rises and leaves the room.

Clouds of mosquitoes have drifted in from the mangroves downriver ... and go sailing by with their fine legs hanging.¹⁰

The guests, who have that evening acted out the rituals of social refinement (within which constructed values such as "civilisation" or "primitive" have been naturalised as common sense), are forced to resort to lighting coils of "dried cow-manure". The satirical absurdity is capped when the Premier offers Gemmy a post as a Customs Officer (175): the subversive agent is incorporated into the bureaucracy.

The novel leaves us in no doubt of the correctness of Mr Frazer's contrasting perspective, which is presented as an entry in his "writing-up book" (129):

We have been wrong to see this continent as hostile and infelicitous, so that only...by felling, clearing, sowing with the seeds we have brought with us, and by importing, sheep, cattle, rabbits, even the very birds of the air, can it be shaped and made habitable. It is habitable already. I think of our early settlers, starving on these shores in the midst of plenty they did not recognise, in a blessed nature ... which they could not, with their English eyes, perceive... We must rub our eyes and look again, clear our minds of what we are looking for to see what is there. Is it not strange, this history of ours, in which explorers ... fall dry-mouthed and exhausted in country where natives ...are living, as they have done for centuries, off the land? (129-130)

It is revealed that, like Jock McIvor, Mr Frazer too has experienced a sensual (as well as, in his case, an intellectual) openness to the land: "Slipping out in the dark he would track night-scented flowers in the summer woods, or *with breathing suspended* and his whole body alert, observe from a hide, in the soft night air and a liquid *light* with its own colours, the life of creatures that were abroad ...while the eyes of others were closed" (131). My italics stress the key elements of such moments – full awareness of body, of predominant light, of suspension of language, signified by the motif of breath. What Mr Frazer's eyes are open to, most importantly, is the insight offered by Gemmy the hybrid:

Our poor friend Gemmy is a forerunner. He is no longer a white man, or a European, whatever his birth, but a true child of the place as it will one day be, a crude one certainly, unaware of what he has achieved ... the exemplum ... deeply moving to those who are willing to look, and to see, without prejudice, that in allowing himself to be at home here, he has crossed the boundaries of his given nature (132).

Some readers may find this a little too spelled out – almost a gloss on the novel's principal theme. Peter Pierce finds the portrayal of both Abbott and Frazer "schematic", and adds that "Malouf makes Frazer the vehicle for some sentimentally didactic appreciation of the Aborigines as the true inhabitants of an antipodean Jerusalem... [and enlists Gemmy] as a prototype of "the coming race" in Australia."¹¹ Though one may concede the schematic quality of sections of the novel, the novel has a more contemporary agenda than merely to describe the colonial stereotype of the "coming man" of the turn of this century. The "coming man" was a mechanism by which the imperial race could be seen to be revitalised through tough, practical, colonial stock.

Mr Frazer and Jock McIvor are not the only characters to sympathise with the outcast Gemmy, or to experience epiphanies. Janet McIvor, though looking back to an idealised Scotland, and frightened by the vastness of this new country, has special moments in which she experiences an authentic connection with it. Her epiphany comes earlier in the novel than Jock's, and is composed of similar elements – the grass, shining colour, bright light, the merging of body and Nature, and transformation. Seeing the pink skin under a scab on her knee, she becomes aware of a "finer being that had somehow been covered up in her"

When she got up and walked out into the paddock, and all the velvety grass heads blazed up, haloed with god, she felt, under the influence of her secret skin, suddenly floaty, as if she had been relieved of the weight of her own life, and the brighter being in her was very gently stirring and shifting its wings.

In a particular vibrancy of light that on another occasion might have given her a headache, all the world shimmered and was changed (59).

Her ability to connect with nature seems equal to her father's: though, like many of Malouf's female characters, she has a core of pragmatism as well that makes her "sceptical of mere feelings" (60).¹² The scepticism is brought to bear on her brother Lachlan's fantasies of being an explorer who searches for Leichhardt. Lachlan imagines being "wounded by blacks", but Gemmy, the faithful black, will "nurse him back to health with herbs only the natives knew of." It is the kind of scenario one would expect to find in colonial boys' adventure tales, and is capped off by his intention to name rivers and mountains after his friends and family or parts of Scotland. Janet secretly disapproves, because "when real life caught up with you, it would not be in a form you had already imagined and got the better of" (61). Perhaps she is proved correct, as Lachlan becomes a politician.

Jock's epiphanous vision included "hundreds of wee bright insects ... metallic, iridescent" (107), while Janet's included "grasshoppers...made of finest glass" (59). Apart from Nature's apparent ability to mimic or surpass the qualities of the made objects, metal and glass, the insect motif is worth nothing of its prevalence in the novel. Mrs Hutchence is most memorable for her heavily symbolic bee – keeping on the edge of the settlement. It is a place that both Gemmy and Janet are drawn to: Janet "loves" the "business with the bees" (138), and the bees are "a necessity to her, as if without them she could never enter into her own thoughts." The bees are thus set up as representing not just Nature, but more specifically, communication. Working without Mrs Hutchence and the bees Janet learns the Ovidian trick: "to see things, to let them enter her" (138-139). Like Jock's and Janet's insects, the bees are "dazzling sparks". To Janet, the bee has the property of an "angel" (141), perhaps in that they bear messages from "*their side of things*" (angels rebishcally both guardians and messengers) (140). More than that, they are Christlike: when a swarm unexpectedly set..... her, Janet does not panic (she is a practical girl still –her oral mind told her this"), and holds her breath and "surrenders", that is, surrenders herself to the realm beyond language. You are our bride, her new and separate mind told her as it drummed and swayed above the earth" (142). The bees, she thinks, have been attracted by her new sexual maturation (The sticky blood flow"): thus she is.

marriageable – to Nature to Christ. This becomes literal when at the end of the novel we find she has become a nun. It is at once a communication with nature and a religious experience, and again Gemmy is partly the agent: she is “convinced” of her metamorphosis when she looks back at the swarm “through Gemmy’s eyes” (144).

3.6 THE CONCLUDING CHAPTER

The concluding chapter of the novel is set much later, during the first world war. Janet is in a convent at Wynnum, a bayside area on the outskirts of Brisbane, where she tides her own bee hives. Janet has created a political crisis for her cousin in Lachlan, now a state cabinet minister, by writing him a letter requesting that she be able to keep up her scientific correspondence (on the subject of bees) with a German priest: “It seemed absurd, she wrote, that the business of nations should get in the way of work that had only to do with nature; which knew nothing, either nothing either, for the little laws of man.

But the letter is also an example of the Capacity of language to challenge “laws” and conventions, to redefine and transform a world-view. Further, as a result of the conventions to redefine and transfer us a world—views, Further, as a result of the letter Lachlan visits Janet and she, ambassador of Nature, gives him an apple. the knowledge she has to offer him is embodied with bee-hive:

It was like peering through into the City of God that is how she thought of it... into the life of little furry-headed angles with a flair for geometry, and some power (this was the great problem she had set herself) of communicating (191-192)

Though she cannot “grasp” the problem not we knows that she did back at Mrs. Hutchence’s. There she remembers, she thought of the swarm, “as an angel,” but she thinks of it “these days as a machine, which was a change but not a difference”; she hopes Lachlan can understand. Here, as elsewhere in Malouf’s fiction, the machine is not unnatural but a bridging device. This is one of several references to a metaphorical resolution of nature and culture in the chapter, most involving machines: there is the swarm that is also like a machine (192); Lachlan’s cutting of the apple with a knife; Lachlan’s memory of making-believe a “dry stick” was a gun (195); and the children making “miniature tables and chairs... of white beeswax” (198). The boundaries are blurred. Even Lachlan’s “breathing” is paralleled with the “humming” of the hive, suggesting the body as a kind of machine, and the blurring of natural and human (193-194). Above all, the image of Gemmy standing on the fence returns to them, like an angel before it falls, and like the bees, an emissary from the future:

the creature, unrecognised and unnamed as yet, that had launched itself out of the unknown world towards them, that the landscape itself had hurled into their midst, a ragged fragment of itself, or of its history or of their own, some part of it that was still to come, had hung there against the pulsing sky (194).

Since Janet is a nun, the Christ-like allusion is also explicably present: “When he was up there’ (she saw the hooked toes again, dusty and misshapen).” But Gemmy as emissary of a new hybrid consciousness is the dominant image. We are told that, nine years after Gemmy’s disappearance, Lachlan learned from a clan that might be the same as Gemmy’s, of a murderous “dispersal” six years before “by a group of cattlemen and two native troopers” (196), but Lachlan cannot establish for certain if Gemmy has been one of the victims.

He comforts himself with the image of Gemmy on the fence, revealed to them “outlined there against a streaming sky. Still balanced” (197). Janet does the same,

musings on the "moment[s] of illumination" – she has been led to by Mrs Hutchence and Gemmy," once and for all, up there on the stripped and shiny rail, never to fall" (199).. They saw him most clearly on the boundary, the edge, and the novel ends with a sustained image of the edge of the coast where Janet lives, the shoreline experiencing its own epiphany of "light" and "running fire", the "vast continent"in touch now with its other life" (200).

It is a lyrically compelling closure, drawing on the preceding romantic discourse as an intimation of hope. This final image stands outside history and language; the shoreline is indifferent to contested human history, perhaps waiting for a time when the human inhabitants have become the gods eagerly anticipated by Ovid.¹³ But directly before the final images Malouf has placed a realistically described reminder of our dark historical formation,¹⁴ a massacre of Aborigines, one of whom may well have been the novel's sympathetic central figure. We are told this massacre has been considered too unremarkable by the newspapers to report, thereby escaping official history.

Despite the modern Australian setting, it is possible to make a similar argument for distancing in *Remembering Babylon*, and certainly Gemmy the hybrid is represented as a first, flawed bearer of possibility, rather than a "super" human ideal"; It could also be argued that Gemmy signifies the limitations of any single "essentialist" view, whether European or Aboriginal; and therefore promotes a "pluralist view of culture."

And yet Malouf's impulse to resist closure, to maintain open-endedness and provisionality, is undermined by the novel's endnote, which explains that the idea for Gemmy Fairley came partly from the actual case of Gemmy Morril, who spoke the words "'I am a British Object'" We are left with the all-pervasive reach of history, and the paradox that mythologies must refer back to that which they disassemble; that time and space and language resist the urge to transcendence.

Malouf said in an interview two years before the publication of *Remembering Babylon*

People used to write about Australia as a hostile place. Our alienation from it was something that existed before, and even quite late – if you think of a poet like A.D. Hope, he's still writing about Australia as a kind of alien place. I don't think Australians in my generation and later really think of that any longer....

I grew up in a world in Brisbane, a sub-tropical place. where we acted all the time as if we were really living in England ... People just pretended they were somewhere else.

That all changed, and I think literature has reflected that change in a very strong way.¹⁷

Perhaps it would not be presuming too much for literature to suggest that David Malouf's "mythologies" have made a contribution to that change.

The relatively short space of eighteen years separates Malouf's first novel from his seventh. Despite his considerable literary output, this may well represent the achievement of mid-career, and any generalizations or predictions have limited value. What is clear is that his work is remarkably homogeneous, as evidenced by the degree of continuity between *Johnno* and *Remembering Babylon*: in each we find a questioning of the difference between "history" and the story that we make of our lives; a yearning for self transformation and for wholeness; a sensitivity to the way we create reality through the language we share a post-Romantic deference to Nature and the imagination; and an exploration of the problem of coming to terms with Australia as a place that we are still in the process of constructing culturally. As an Australian writer of the late twentieth century, Malouf's work has demonstrated how

“the novel serves as the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

We have, in this unit, mainly discussed the structure of the novel, the characters the metaphors and the epiphanies.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on the structure of the novel.
2. Discuss the main characters
3. Critically analyse the metonyms, the epiphanies and the metaphors.

UNIT 4 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND COMMUNICATION

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Narrative Technique
- 4.3 Language and Communication in *Remembering Babylon*
- 4.4 Some more aspects of Language
- 4.5 Representing the Aboriginal
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will mainly discuss the narrative technique and the problem of language and communication in the novel.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A novelist can tell a story in many ways. The narrative of *Remembering Babylon* has been examined and commented on by several Australian literary critics and theorists. Narrative in modern fiction is complex because it is experimental and innovative. As you have probably learnt from your study of the British novel, there are various narrative techniques. This unit will focus on Malouf's way of telling us the story of Gemmy Fairley and the early years of Colonial Australia.

4.2 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Remembering Babylon is unique for the genre shifts in its narrative technique as it moves from straightforward narrative to flashbacks, diary entries, records of journals and a mystical and poetic evocation of the landscape. It has been called a mixed narrative with dual perspectives. The novel re-imagines a key moment in Australian history – the contact between the settlers and the aborigines and between the settlers and the land. The novel is one of the many revisionist novels of early Australian settlement. Other Australian authors such as Eleanor Dark, Kylie Tennant, Rodney Hall, Thomas Keneally and Robert Drewe have all attempted to re-image this phase of Australian history. The narrative technique evolves from the act of remembering and is part of the 'Memoir' tradition in Australian fiction. The title resonates throughout the work. What are the problems that one is likely to encounter in analysing Malouf's narrative technique?

The first is that of incompleteness or rather the suggestion of incompleteness. The novel introduces the reader to the lives and circumstances which are not fully realised. The narrative withdraws in space and time from the core of the story. The promise of a saga is cut short by the truncated story. The novel shifts constantly from saga to historical fiction, the satire of colonialism. There is no sustained narrative mode. There seem to be many books in *Remembering Babylon*. In keeping with his

“the novel serves as the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world.

**Structure,
Characters and
Metaphors**

3.5 LET US SUM UP

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3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on the structure of the novel.
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fictional technique this novel is also short (only 200 pages), almost like a novella, but it also resembles the epic in its scope and ambition. If Malouf's *The Great World* dealt with the Anzac experience in the Second World War, *Remembering Babylon* deals with the history of outback pioneering in the 1850's.

The narrative is fraught with the anxiety of "remembering" to maintain links between generations. It is also a narrative of the extraordinary about the ordinary. One is reminded here of R.K. Narayan's ordinary characters and their extraordinary heroics. The novel begins with the observing consciousness of a child; Lachlan of Malouf's technique seems to be expository rather than dramatic – more showing than telling. There is a story within a story as Gemmy's story later because a part of the aborigines is the communal store of narrative: "In time his coming among them became another tale they told and he would listen to it with a kind of wonder" (p.29). This is the Australian version of the American "captivity narrative", stories of people abducted by Indians. Gemmy's story is also a version of the lost child story in Australian fiction and painting, such as Marcus Clarke's "Pretty Dick" (1869) or Joseph Turphy's *Such is Life* (1903). The lost child story is a kind of commentary on the harshness of the Australian bush or outback. Gemmy, thus, becomes a prototype of the lost child and the captive. The landscape description in Barbara Baynton's stories are echoed in the description of Gemmy when he is first spotted by the children.

"In the intense heat that made everything you looked at warp and glare, a fragment of ti-tree swamp, some bit of the land over there that was forbidden to them, had detached itself from the band of grey that made up the far side of the swamp, and in a shape more like watery, heat struck mirage than a thing of substance, elongated and airily indistinct, was bowling, leaping, flying towards them"(p.4)

Problems of form arise when Malouf starts numerous stories in such a brief novel. There is a digressiveness in the technique with the introduction of smaller stories such as the sketch of Mrs. Hutchence from Malacca which Malouf leaves unresolved. The story of the local school teacher, George Abbot is another vignette. Juxtaposed with this is the more sympathetic response of Mr. Frazer. Malouf makes Frazer the vehicle for some sentimental appreciation of the aboriginals, as the true inhabitants of this Promised Land though it seems like Babylon to the settlers.

Through Frazer, Malouf takes the reader to another story away from the outback, and to the residence of Governor Bowen. Malouf's mild satire ridicules this attempt to recreate the home country in an alien environment.

Malouf is also aware of the Australian saga novels of the inter-war years. In these fictions, the settlers bravely combated natural forces of fire, flood and drought. All this is implied subtly and with the greatest ceremony in *Remembering Babylon*. The saga material is narrated through the consciousness of Ellen McIvor as she remembers arriving in Brisbane and her past in Scotland.

The narrative contains what is known as Malouf's disappearing acts' where characters conveniently disappear such as the McIvors and Gemmy Fairley. The narrative takes the form of a revisionist text as it reimagines Australia's colonial history. There is nostalgia for imagined historical moments, in this case the early years of colonial settlement.

The narrative technique is also intimately connected with the mystery of language. It is through the mystery that people and land meet in a moment of epiphany that transcends space and time.

Malouf has never been a writer of voluminous novels. In fact all the novels are rather short. *Remembering Babylon* is only 200 pages long and the twenty chapters include several flashbacks and one fast forward. "Malouf is one of the strict economists – of the imagination – a major talent who feels compelled to express himself in miniature"

(Peter Craven). His canvases are usually small, he is no Tolstoy or D.H. Lawrence nor is he a Patrick White or Christina Stead. The cinematic technique is enhanced to great visual effects as the novel draws to a close. The narrative has a symmetry in that it begins and ends with the same characters.

4.3 LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN REMEMBERING BABYLON

In his more recent novel *Remembering Babylon* Malouf returns to similar themes as those in *An Imaginary Life*, but moves from the fringes of the Roman empire to nine tenth-century Queensland, Australia. The struggles of characters to achieve wholeness in this novel are taken up not through silence as they were in *An Imaginary Life* but rather through an emphasis on sensory and gestural communication.

The sensory group receives the most attention in this novel, highlighting examples which seem to emphasize the transformative nature of these non-verbal communicative experiences; many important scenes explore the experiences of three major characters, Jock McLvor, his daughter, Janet, and Gemmy Fairley, the young man who after living among the Aborigines for sixteen years, joins a pioneer community. Before working more closely at Janet and Gemmy, we note a significant scene with Janet's father, Jock. He is walking alone in a field, reflecting on how he has changed since Gemmy arrived, when he experiences a kind of epiphany:

Wading through waist-high grass, he was surprised to see all the tips beaded with green, as if some new growth had come into the world that till now he had never seen or heard of. When he looked closer it was hundreds of wee bright insects, each the size of his little fingernail, metallic, iridescent, and the discovery of them, the new light they brought to the scene, was a lightness in him – that was what surprised him like a form of knowledge he had broken through to. It was unnameable, which disturbed him, but was also exhilarating; for a moment he was entirely happy. (P107)

This sensory experience is typical of many in the novel. Jock McLvor uses his bodily senses (sight, hearing, touch) to see the reality of the Australian landscape anew. He responds to his new vision with feelings of surprise disturbance, and joy. And notably, the knowledge that he gains is unnameable; that is he cannot express it in rational, discursive language, experiencing it instead through his senses.

Later in the novel, Janet McLvor, the eldest daughter of the family that has taken in Gemmy Fairly, has a similar experience. The experience is non-verbal too based entirely in her body and senses. It also allows her to understand Gemmy fully for the first time. In this short but pivotal episode, Janet goes to visit Mrs Hutchence to help with the beekeeping Janet has already found that beekeeping is deeply satisfying to her; she loves the bees now and finds them a necessity.... as if without them she could never enter into her own thoughts" (138). Her sense that without the bees she could not enter her own thoughts – her language is important. She realizes that both the discursive and non-discursive are essential to fully experiencing life, that both are essential for full cognitive life. And it is significant that her understanding come through bees, animals which have a sophisticated system of communication themselves. In this scene, it is as if Malouf has joined the human sensory capabilities with an animal communication system to symbolize Janet's transformation. Although Janet is about to have a life altering experience, she initially denies the significance of the scene, thinking that there is no mystery in the tableau of bees, clouds of billowing smoke, and the sun as dazzling sparks. Eventually, however, she realizes that it is communicative, as Malouf writes that for her the scene "– just the same, touched on something, just at the edge of thought, that

she could not catch hold of" (139). In its emphasis on the power of the non-discursive, the parallels with her father's experience described above is striking.

Then, as Janet goes to work with Mrs. Hutchence, a swarm of bees alights on her, covering her body quickly and in a single cloud. "She just had time to see her hands covered with plushy, alive fur gloves before her whole body crusted over and she was blazingly gathered into the single sound they made, the single mind" (142). At this point Janet's rational mind tells her to stand still that the bees will not sting as they are already full. She then distinguishes between she calls her old mind (the one that uses verbal language and tells her what to do) and her "new and separate mind" her new mind – one that is linked to the sensory and the bee – tells her "you are our bride" and it is outside her body, drumming and swaying above the earth (142). Janet links this new mind and the mind of the bees to her body and its new phase signaled by menstruation. As she stands still, and realizes that it matters not whether she is girl, woman, or tree. Mrs. Hutchence and Gemmy appear with the smoke that attracts the bees. The bees peel off her body. "Like a crust, till she stood in her own skin again which was fresh where the air touched it" (142-43). Her skin seems new to her now and she remains 'a little out of herself'. Gemmy and Mrs. Hutchence fret over her. Later after she is grown up and has become an expert on bees, she remembers the experience as both a physical "bodily excitement" and a time "when her mind had for a moment been their unbodied one and she had been drawn into the process and mystery of things" (143). Here Malouf clearly suggests that the verbal and the sensory are needed to come to an understanding of the mystery of life, or to put it another way, to understand fully one's mental life. Janet experiences a kind of "wholeness" that Malouf himself in a video interview, has said is one of his primary concerns in his novels. ("An Imaginary life" 1987).

Malouf writes that Janet is surprised that she does not appear changed to Mrs. Hutchence, because to her, her old body has been born a new. Furthermore, after the experience Janet has a vision of herself not as a gawky girl, but as a ch-----stump black and bubbling. Since she sees this image "through Gemmy's eyes". She is convinced of its truth. This ability to see through Gemmy's eyes for the first time is representative of her deepened understanding of him; she cannot understand who he is solely through discursive language and her intellect – she needs a sensory experience such as the one with the bees to come to such as understanding. Knowing that she sees for the first time from his perspective enables her to experience unity between body and mind. The experience is transformative and could not be accomplished without Gemmy and the sensory knowledge provided by the bees.

Indeed, Gemmy is linked with James from early on in the novel. Throughout the novel, Gemmy is presented as a character with two important characteristics. First, he is the catalyst for the other characters growth and transformative experiences. Second, he is the one character who has integrated the various non-verbal forms of communication. As a fully sensory human, Gemmy literally sniffs, tastes, looks, gestures, and silently listens his way through the novel. One early episode that will serve as an example of the importance of gesture for Gemmy occurs after he has just entered the white settler's homestead and tries to communicate with them. A few English words begin to come back to him, but it is gesture that he relies upon to tell the story of his sixteen years with the Aborigines:

All of which he made them understand partly with signs, partly with words that he dragged up at need, but in such a distorted form as he hummed and hooted and shot spittle out of his mouth, and tried to get his tongue around them that it was the signs their understanding leapt at. (10)

The settlers try to read his gestures and Gemmy, also learns to read their non-verbal gestures. At first Gemmy has difficulty reading their "wooden expressions and gestures" and it is only later, after much watching and study, that he is able to understand and distinguish the small signs that made them trackable:

...the ball of gristle in the corner of a man's cheek, which you could actually hear the soft click of if you listened for it: the swelling of the worm like vein in a man's temple just below the hairline, the tightening of the crow's feet round his eyes. The almost imperceptible flicker of pinkish naked lids.... He saw these things now, and what astonished him was how much they gave away. Perhaps their faces were more expressive because he could catch these days more of the words they used even the ones they left unspoken. So long as he was deaf to the one he had been blind to the other. No more.

Here Gemmy shows his understanding of the necessity of both verbal and non-verbal communication systems: it is significant, too, that he arrives at his insight long before any of the white settlers reach a similar understanding. Tragically for Gemmy, however, he too undergoes a transformation, but it is a reversal of Janet's. Gemmy begins to rely more heavily on verbal discursive language, the English of the settlers, having preciously used his knowledge of gestures, signs, and his senses to be his guide in understanding and reading them. Gemmy dies as a result of his attempts to master verbal language. First he dies symbolically when the rain washes the written words (i.e. the so-called story of his life). Off a piece of paper, the language that he thinks has captured his strength but is nothing more than the scribbling of school boys. Then he dies again when he disappears from the novel and the world of Janet and Lachlan. In one sense then, discursive language, especially the written, is responsible for his demise. Gemmy gives it tremendous power which undoes him, and the settlers use the difficulties with verbal language as their sources of distrust and suspicion of Gemmy.

Thus, these experiences of Janet and Gemmy, demonstrate beautifully the paradox of verbal language; it has both creative and destructive elements, containing the potential to bring about psychic wholeness or disintegration and death.

To sum up: *Remembering Babylon* is preoccupied with the role of non-verbal communication experiences in the quest for wholeness and unity. The novel emphasises other aspects of non-verbal communication, notably the sensory. Powerful episodes centred in bodily sensation are shown to lend to life-altering experiences for Janet McIvor, Gemmy Fairley, and others. Further the revelatory ending of *Remembering Babylon*, with its echoes of incantation and epiphany, highlights Malouf's exploration of how one knows and experiences the world and whether unity and transformation are possible. Janet McIvor's final memories of Gemmy Fairley as she watches the day's light dying away suggest that a fully connected life – one in which communion with other humans, animals, or nature – lies within our grasp Malouf writes that the light and the sea approach each other. "As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach one another." (200) The syntactic linking of 'prayer', 'knowledge', and 'one another', as well as their denotations and connotations, intimate the larger existential and epistemological question that drive Malouf's fiction.

As an avid reader, you must have observed that as a writer Malouf combines a deep understanding of linguistic behaviour with a singular aesthetic vision.

4.4 SOME MORE ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE

In the earlier section we discussed the language and communication in the novel: in this section we will discuss some more aspects of the language and we may repeat some of the points discussed earlier. The repetition, I may remind you, is meant for reinforcement in distance education.

Remembering Babylon is an extraordinary parable of exile, identity and language loss. Malouf is preoccupied with communication and explores the relationship between verbal and nonverbal communication or the lack of it in his poetry and fiction; for example: in the poem entitled "To be Written in another Tongue" and in the short story, "The only speaker of his Tongue". Language for Malouf plays a vital role in the construction of identity. Language is also connected with the theme of exile, and is thus a strong theme in much of his writing.

The novel's complex shifts in chronology and focus yield a dramatically simple story. The marginalisation of Gemmy's story results from the fact that it is merely one more element in the parable of alienation and assimilation. And this is developed through a meditation on language and identity. The novel is a study of colonization through the prison of language. Language mutation and language loss underlines the narrative. Gemmy loses his language being away with the aborigines and acquires a new one. He tries to get back to the White settlement to "put the words back in his mouth". The novel becomes a microcosm of all-linguistic adaptation and change.

Ironically the McIvor family who adopt him are from Scotland and so do not speak English. They too experience language loss. George Abbot tries to teach his rugged pupils English words that they would never be able to relate to the visionary Mr. Frazer's data on local flora in the native tongue. Gemmy knows that there are no words in English for the natural life of Australia. **Gemmy has this mystical view of the oneness of language and environment that he got from the aborigines and which he passes on to Frazer.**

The inability to adapt linguistically is matched by a failure to adjust culturally. The Australian landscape is named with a European sensibility. Distant England becomes a point of reference for the things relating to Australia.

Malouf employs nonverbal communication such as gestures, silence, sensory communication; and animal communication systems. Human language for Malouf is only one of the sign systems in the dense network of signs in the world. Gemmy experiences a wordless unity during his meeting with the aborigines. Silence becomes a positive experience for Gemmy as it did for Ovid in Tomis. The characters struggle to achieve a unity of being through sensory communication. Jock McIvor, Janet and Gemmy rave this sensory experience. Jock experiences a oneness with the land as he walks alone in a field. He uses his bodily senses to see the reality of the Australian landscape since he has thought he cannot express his knowledge in rational terms. Janet too has a similar experience in bee-keeping which allows her to understand Gemmy for the first time. Her understanding comes through the bees - insects with their own sophisticated system of communication in the animal world. Janet cannot understand Gemmy through her rational intellect. She needs a sensory experience. This use of sense perception links Gemmy with Janet. Like Ovid, Gemmy has a transforming effect on the other characters. His senses were shaped by his life with the Aborigines. Gemmy sniffs, tastes, looks, gestures and silently listens his way through the novel. He relies chiefly on gesture to tell his story of his 16 years with the aborigines. Gemmy begins to rely on the verbal language and this leads to death. First he dies symbolically when the rain-washes off the written words on the paper, which he thinks, is a record of his life. He dies again when he disappears. Gemmy gives language a great power and this kills him. What Malouf demonstrates in this novel, in the experiences of Janet and Gemmy is the paradox of the verbal language. It can be both creative and destructive. The themes of language and exile are used to explore transformation. The revelatory ending of the novel with its incantatory effects is almost like an epiphany. Some critics see Malouf as a kind of structuralist. He tends to set up binary opposites such as mind and body, home and exile, nature and culture, dream and reality. Verbal and non-verbal language is another. Malouf aims for a reconciliation of these binary conflicts and is conscious that each is part of a pair and are required for creating a wholeness in life, for a complete experience of the world.

4.5 REPRESENTING THE ABORIGINAL

White perceptions of the aboriginal form part of the tradition of Australian fiction. Three early Australian novels that deal significantly with the Aborigines are *Ralph Rashleigh* (1840's) by James Tucker, *The Emigrant Family* (1849) by Alexander Harris and *Fifty Years Ago: an Australian Tale* (1864) by Charles de Boos. Others followed such as Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardo* 1929, Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1939) and Poor Fellow My Country (1975) and Eleanor Dark's *The Timeless Land* (1941). This literary tradition continued into the 1950's, 60's and 70's with such works as Randolph Stow's *To the Islands* (1958), Peter Mathers' *Trap* (1966) and Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1972) and Nene Gare's *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961).

Current fiction in this area has undergone a transformation. Rodney Hall's *The Second Bridegroom* (1991) is a reassessment of early perception of the Aborigines. Then there is Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows*, which explores white violence on the Aborigines. *Remembering Babylon* represents a current trend by the White Australian authors while writing about aborigines to look backwards. To try and reinvent them as the peaceable inhabitants of a pre colonial Eden is perhaps safer than dealing with the present situation. In the *Remembering Babylon*, another novel about a white man who has lived with the Aborigines in the mid 19th Century, we see the Aborigines at one remove from the author. Malouf's entry point into the alien (to the Europeans) world of the aboriginal culture is teenager Gemmy Fairley who has spent his formative years among them and becomes an object of curiosity, suspicion and bigotry when he returns to white settlement. Germain Green's attack titled "Malouf's Objectionable Whitewash" may have consolidated the novel's position as a literary landmark but it focussed attention on Malouf's representation of the aborigines. Malouf keeps the reader on the periphery of the aboriginal life. We only glimpse them by proxy, through the agency of Gemmy. In fact Malouf has been accused of stereotyping the borigines' spirituality in his description of Gemmy's meeting with them on the farm. Green felt that Malouf relegates the Aborigines to mere symbolization of the white mans Id and for not including the fact that European settlement introduced disease, displaced the the Aborigines from their land and filled it with unsuitable livestock. The Whites called the Aborigines savages and did not refer to themselves as invaders. But Malouf is conceived with the fears of white society that the Aborigines might try to drive the whites out. This is still evident in the objections to the Maho decision. Suzanne Falkiner confronts Green's attack with the view that Malouf's book is a work of the imagination, a metaphor and poetic novel. Malouf has stated that the inherent fear of aboriginality implicit in many Europeans including himself is one of the subjects he is trying to address in the novel.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

We have discussed the peculiarities of the narrative technique used by David Malouf and also analysed the problem of language and communication in the novel.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Given an account of David Malouf, the writer and his work.
2. What links do you perceive in the fictional worlds created by David Malouf?
3. Comment on the major themes and preoccupations in the fiction of David Malouf.

4. "Remembering Babylon reflects the major concerns of a trans-cultural writer"
– Discuss
5. How does Malouf re-imagine Australian colonial history in *Remembering Babylon*.
6. *Remembering Babylon* exhibits a tension between remembering and forgetting. Discuss.
7. Comment on the importance of place or setting and its use in *Remembering Babylon*
8. Consider Gemmy's function as a 'between-world's character.
9. In *Remembering Babylon* does Malouf compare Indigenous and European worlds or does indigeneity merely feature as the backdrop for colonial performance?
10. Contemporary writers often speak of the politicisation of space in terms of "margins and periphery". Can you perceive this dictionary in *Remembering Babylon*?
11. Malouf is not concerned with language but the failure of language to fully encompass experience. How does this manifest in *Remembering Babylon*?
12. Comment on *Remembering Babylon* as a mixed narrative of contact.

4.7 SUGGESTED READING

1. Bishop, Peter (1982) 'David Malouf and the Language of Exile', Australian Literary Studies, Vol.10, No.4, Oct.pp.419-436.
2. Greer, Germaine (1993) 'Malouf's Objectionable Whitewash' *The Age* 3 Nov.II.
3. Kenneally, Cath (1993), 'As Little Children in the Promised Land' Australian Book Review No.150, May 8-9.
4. Nettlebeck, Amanda (1994) *Provisional Maps: Critical Essays on David Malouf* University of Queensland. Press: University of Western, Australia.
5. Nelson, Philip. (1990) *Imagined Lives: A Study of David Malouf*. University of Queensland Press, 39-66.
6. Otto, Peter (1993) 'Forgetting Colonialism', *Meanjin* 3, 545-557.
7. Spinks, Lee (1995) Allegory, Space, Colonialism: Remembering Babylon and the Production of Colonial history' *ALS* Vol.17, No.2, 166.
8. Tulip, James (1990) *David Malouf*, St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

UNIT 5 THEMES

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 From Colonial Identity to National Identity
- 5.3 Exile and Alienation
- 5.4 Faultlines in White Australian Identity
- 5.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.6 Questions

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will critically analyse the themes like from Colonial Identity to National Identity Exile and Alienation and Faultlines in White Australian Identity

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Several important issues present themselves in an analysis of David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*. One such important issue is the delineation of the evolution of Australia's colonial identity into a national identity using the construct of change. Malouf attempts to forget or re-imagine colonialism as he attempts to remember (and re-member) it in the nineteenth century.

5.2 FROM COLONIAL IDENTITY TO A NATIONAL IDENTITY

Remembering Babylon begins with the sentence: "One day in the middle of the nineteenth century, when settlement in Queensland had advanced little more than halfway up the coast....." This is an imaginary line drawn by the author that divides colonial settlement from the unknown. A novel that concerns itself with margins and periphery, the boundary lines are drawn for the minimal level of contact. One of the myths of Australia was that it was an unknown empty space, a terra nullus, with the Europeans as the Chosen People, encountering this Wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Australia was a blank space to be filled in by the 'civilising' power of Europe. The indigenous people being breeds, without law – European or English Law – had to give way before European settlement.

The land was threatening because it did not fit in the categories that the colonisers wished to impose on it. All that they saw were 'the strange scribbling of nature learning how to write.' But the aborigines belonged here and could read the Book of Nature closed to the white settlers. So they too were subsumed into this vast unknown and the dread it provoked. White settlers have failed to come to terms with the fact is that Gemmy shared the life of the black fellows and learned their language and yet comes back to claim his birthright as a 'British object.'

"And the horror it carries to you is not just the smell, in your own sweat, of a half forgotten swamp-world going back deep in both of you, but that for him, as you meet here face to face in the sun, you and all of you stand for have not yet appeared over

4. "Remembering Babylon reflects the major concerns of a trans-cultural writer"
– Discuss.
5. How does Malouf re-imagine Australian colonial history in *Remembering Babylon*.
6. *Remembering Babylon* exhibits a tension between remembering and forgetting. Discuss.
7. Comment on the importance of place or setting and its use in *Remembering Babylon*.
8. Consider Gemmy's function as a 'between-world's character.
9. In *Remembering Babylon* does Malouf compare Indigenous and European worlds or does indigeneity merely feature as the backdrop for colonial performance?
10. Contemporary writers often speak of the politicisation of space in terms of "margins and periphery". Can you perceive this dictionary in *Remembering Babylon*?
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12. Comment on *Remembering Babylon* as a mixed narrative of contact.

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the horizon of the world...and you meet at last in a terrifying equality that strips the last rags from your soul and leaves you so far out on the edge of yourself that your fear now is that you may never get back." (p.43)

A contemporary parallel can be found in the panic occasioned by the Mabo decision. The notion that the aboriginal people have rights as the white Australians is like Gemmy's crossing of the line of demarcation which threatens the settler's sense of superiority and identity. Looking at Gemmy out of the settlers feel that civilisation and its effects can be cancelled. They respond by drawing Gemmy out of the settlement and back to the aborigines where he is later killed by a group of whites. "...ridden down and brought to earth by blows from a stirrup iron...an effective weapon, when used at a gallop, for smashing skulls." (p.196). This is true to the brutality of the times but Malouf is also concerned with transformation and reconstruction.

Among the settlers, Janet McIvor and her cousin Lachlan Beattie are changed forever after this meeting with Gemmy. They are the only two characters who open out to the possibilities that Gemmy represents. Janet moves from the colonial space of nineteenth century Queensland to the sacred space of the traditional aboriginal society. She experiences a moment of epiphany, a moment also of great danger when she is covered by a swarm of bees. Instead of shrinking from this danger which would have proved fatal, she rises above colonial fears sees into 'the life of things.'

When Malouf re-imagines the colonial past, he is conscious that white Australians rejected aboriginal culture and everything it stood for. They tried to impose their one-dimensional notion of reality. They had closed their minds to the aboriginal way of life which is largely symbolic and in which the psychic and the physical are the two aspects of one reality. The Mabo decision allows for this difference, especially their difference in their relationship with the land. But this difference will not be accepted until the white Australians learn to accept the aboriginal other. This is where the figure of Lachlan becomes important. Lachlan, the typical idealistic is a settler of legend and he is full of heroic visions. His confidence is shaken as Gemmy's arrival confuses things. All those neatly drawn lines that distinguish black from white, civilised from savage, good from evil are challenged. Though Lachlan goes on to become a member of Parliament, the memory of Gemmy continues to haunt him. The ragged figure of this white-black fellow remains with him balanced between the colonial settlement and the unknown country beyond. When he discovers the bones of Gemmy, he tells his uncle about it and acknowledges his own complicity in the killings and dispossession of a people. Lachlan's sense of guilt is Malouf's way of setting right these historic wrongs.

Janet too moves out of the narrow, ideological enclosures of the white Australian culture to recognition of the other aboriginal Australia. This act of recognition is itself a move in the right direction. This is what she recognises in the light of the moon, towards the mystical end of the novel where "the outline of the vast continent appears, in touch now with its other life." (p.200).

The process of transformation extends to some of the other characters as well. Mr. Frazer the minister – botanist, is the only adult who learns something from Gemmy. Just as Mr. Frazer helps Gemmy to translate his life into English, Gemmy in turn helps him to translate the landscape of Australia, its flora and fauna into something comprehensible. He learns, by defining the particular, to redefine the whole and in doing finds himself transformed as well. Thus through the mystery of the imagination, the political is transformed into the aesthetic and psychological and is accompanied by the metamorphosis of the colonial into the national. Then only it will be possible to build an authentic Australian identity. This identity is androgynous. It holds together both primitive and civilized, masculine and feminine, the empowered and the powerless. Janet speaks for the primitive voice of the land and Lachlan represents the Australian political and social life. But this aboriginal

other. The focal point for this re-membering is Gemmy who plays a complex role. He serves as a catalyst for the disorientation of the colonial experience. As a whiteman who arrives in settler society from the aboriginal Australia he seems to have 'lost it' – the elusive quality that defines white colonial culture. That threat to white civilisation unsettles the colony. Gemmy also embodies the feared unknown. As a white-black-feller he evokes fears of deracination. He also implies a future Australian race that is not simply black or white, aboriginal or European, but an identity that stands between these poles. It is through Lachlan's and Janet's memory that Gemmy survives as the 'fountain-light' of their adult day.

A passage of fifty years separates the novel's final chapter from its mid-nineteenth century beginning. This is about ten years after federation (the formation of the States) and just before the First World War. These political markers which bring the colonies together as a single nation help to forge a collective identity. The imagination creates a national identity built on the re-membering of different peoples and states into the nation of Australia. This makes for the reading of the novel as a redemptive narrative as it transforms a moment of violent dispossession into an anticipation of national unity.

5.3 EXILE AND ALIENATIONS

In a way *Remembering Babylon* is an investigation of the age of old human problem of exile. The most famous of these voluntary exiles were the ancient Israelites in their migration from Ur of the Chaldees through the desert to the Promised Land of Canaan. Like them, most of Malouf's characters in this novel have turned their back on their homeland in an attempt to find a new home at the antipodes. The ancient Israelites had the voice of their God and a pillar of cloud or fire to Guide them to their new home. But what about migrants like the McIvors? Ellen McIvor is inspired by a desire for sunlight and space, two elements she could not find in the Scottish mining town she had grown up in.

The concept of exile is important in the present day Australia when so many of its residents come from different parts of the world. Very often school children are asked to consider the question of what Australia means to them, home or exile? For Ellen and Jock, Scotland remain home with its familiar voices, song and the old patterns of life. The transplanted McIvors, Corcorans and Sweetmans have abandoned mine-pits and blackmities to stake their claim in the new world are unsure whether it will lead to their salvation or their downfall. There is no name as yet for the dusty track runs by the General Store, road connecting their settlement to the others on the coast. The newcomers have barely made a scratch on the vastness that surrounds them.

Linked to exile is the theme of alienation – the terrible human divides wrought by race, class and culture. Malouf effectively explores this theme through the role of Gemmy Fairley. He had dramatised this difficult communion between civilised and primitive in an earlier novel, *An Imaginary Life* (1978) where Ovid befriending a wolf boy learns to communicate in silence. Human societies have always had their outsiders, those who are different because of appearance, religion or race. Gemmy's difference makes him an object of fear, especially as he had lived for sixteen years with the aborigines.

The land is another issue at stake in the novel. The setting of outback Queensland influences the main characters. Their attitude to the land is one of the indications that their place of exile has become part of the life of the imagination.

George Abbot, the school teacher finds the land symbolic of the defeat of his ambition and of his own degradation. He finds the climate and lush plant life

repellant. The aborigines seem to him to represent life in its lowest human form. George fears his degeneration the most. When his life is transformed by meeting Leona, his new life is symbolised by his perception of the beauty of sunset in the bush. Janet McIvor chooses to work with bees partly because they seem to her to represent the national richness of the land. The uniqueness of the land is a source of delight to Mr. Frazer. Jock McIvor's attitude changes from shock to joy. He is at first appalled by the harshness of land, of the intemperate climate but, later has a vision which is poetic in intensity and delight.

5.4 FAULTLINES IN WHITE AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

There can be few sentient visitors to Australia unaffected by their contact, however peripheral, with that country's indigenous inhabitants. The sight of drink dulled aborigines, enveloped in the almost palpable shroud of their misery, shock and profoundly disturbs. While slumped at the bar of a segregated pub in some desolate, red-neck town in the continent's endless interior, or wandering aimlessly in the precincts of a city shopping-mall, their blank gaze an opaque, protective membrane against the visual aggression of their urban surroundings, theirs is an intensely powerful presence; it exudes despair. In common with North America's Indians, those other tragic victims of colonial rapacity, their closed-down, sealed-off look tells of 'pain beyond any possible telling, depopulation, the loss of homeland, the loss of any fore-seeable future.....'. For these wretched people are the broken shards of a more than 40,000 year old civilization. Wantonly destroyed by a mere two centuries of colonization they are the psychically mutilated survivors of the policy of genocide that British settlers pursued from their earliest days in the colony.

And yet it was not until the bi-centennial celebrations of 1988 that the aboriginal population of Australia, demonstrating for the first time en masse, actually succeeded in focusing generalized public attention on the intolerable conditions of their existence. It took two hundred years and the virtual extermination of one of the earth's most ancient peoples before even a minority of whites began finally to concede that an irreparable injustice had been committed against Australia's autochthones.

There is a terrible inexorability in the pattern that colonization follows. Why that should be so, what reasons may be adduced for the malignant ethnocentrism of colonizers – these are the questions that form the main axis of David Malouf's novel, *Remembering Babylon*, published in 1993. Writing in the moral and political wake of the first stirrings of organized aboriginal protest, Malouf reflects in his novel on the social and psychological reflexes that determined the white man's policy towards the Australian continent and its native inhabitants. He also outlines the opportunities that the pioneer settlers failed to take and which had they been taken, would almost certainly have allowed their descendants firstly, to develop a more equitable relationship with the aboriginal population; secondly, to avoid many of the ecological disasters which Australia has suffered as a direct result of colonization, and finally, to forge a less incongruous, more authentically Australian identity than that which is theirs today.

Yet Malouf does not choose to address the aborigine issue directly. Opting for an oblique approach, he examines, with the endlessly probing eye of the pathologist, the reactions of a group of British settlers to the arrival in their midst of Gemmy Fairley, an English casta way 'gone native'. In his, late twenties when the narrative begins, Gemmy was, we discover from the narrator's subsequent recourse to flashbacks, tossed overboard in his early teens from a British ship, sailing for the shores of Northern Queensland. The last sixteen years of his life have been spent with the aboriginal tribe who discovered him on the beach where he lay stranded, like some helpless marine creature the sea had washed up.

The effectiveness of Malouf's strategy lies in the fact that the gap he incites readers to fill obliges the latter to imagine for themselves the grim answer to the ominous rhetorical question that, without ever being explicitly formulated, rumbles like distant thunder in the sub-text of the novel. Namely if Gemmy Fairley, a white adult Anglo Saxon male, is capable of eliciting such intense hostility on the part of his compatriots merely because of his lengthy association with aborigines, what must be the response of those same men and women when confronted with the aboriginal, people itself?

Making the novel's main protagonist a British subject whose prolonged exposure to, and radical transformation by, aboriginal culture has made of him a kind of human palimpsest, has the further advantage of providing an unusually revealing angle from which to view the settler's relationship with their native culture. For it is through the depiction of the white community's pathological response to Gemmy's absence of recognizable Anglo-Saxon characteristics that Malouf both painstakingly exposes the extent of the colonizing society's sense of insecurity vis-à-vis its own socio-cultural identity and, at the same highlights the overweening importance that a common language, shared cultural references and a joint set of codes inevitably assume for the members of such a profoundly dislocated society.

Though Gemmy is presented in successive chapters of the novel from the varying perspectives of a multiplicity of focalizers, **what remains constant in all of the disparate evocations of him is the arresting image of a white black man, an aboriginalized white.** His original Anglo-Saxon self has, you must assume, been completely overlaid – if not enterly effaced – by more than a decade and a half of shared existence with the indigenous tribal people who rescued him. Significantly the effects of this accidental superimposure of one identity over another are not confined to Gemmy himself. They are also evident in the dangerous tensions that are seen to surface among the white settlers when, having grudgingly admitted Gemmy into their midst, they discover that they can neither 'read' his appearance, nor decode his behaviour.

As we shall have repeated occasions to note in this Unit, Malouf's characterization of the settlers very faithfully reproduces many of the attitudes that prevailed in Victorian Britain as a result of nineteenth century 'Scientific' investigations into questions of race and post Darwinian thought on the theory of human evolution. In his study of colonialist fiction entitled *The Savage In Literature*, Brian V. Street explains, for instance, that 'a distrust of anomalies, caused partly by the continual attempt to define precisely the different groups of mankind was reinforced by specific scientific pronouncements about the native of 'hybrids,' so that the Englishman was wary of anyone who seemed to be crossing racial boundaries'. It was, Street demonstrates, a feeling that found abundant, expression in the literature of the period, Kipling being one notable example of the many Victorian authors who '(added)' the scientific distrust of the biological hybrid the cultural xenophobia of the nineteenth century Englishman towards, the character who chooses to be a 'racial anomaly'.

From the earliest pages of Malouf's novel, Gemmy, as he is seen by the various members of the community to which he has been drawn (as if by some instinctive animal urge to sniff out the barely remembered scent of his former existence) is consistently identified with the territory from which he suddenly appears, as opposed to the country from which like the settlers, he originates. Twelve-year old Lachlan Beattie's (and thus the readers) crucial first impression of Gemmy is for instance, that he is a fragment of ti-tree swamp, some bit of land over there that was forbidden to (the children)'. On realizing, however, that what he has taken to be an integral feature of the surrounding topography is, in reality, an autonomous living being, Lachlan's immediate conclusion is that, given the terrain from which the apparition is emerging, the latter can only be a black and that therefore the settlement is being raided by blacks. In the boy's mind, **the link between the land beyond the settler's boundaries and the threat of hostile natives is automatic and absolute.**

More importantly, the place from which Gemmy launches himself to hop and flap his way towards the mesmerised Lachlan and his cousins is perceived by them as being 'the abode of everything savage and fearsome. Of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark. Nor, is it just Gemmy's over-imaginative, childish captors who view their environment in this way since the white adults' perception of the area around the settlement can scarcely be said to differ. 'The country he had broken out of was all unknown to them. Even in full sunlight it was impenetrable dark. 'From the moment Gemmy enters the narrative, then, the reader, cannot fail to register that, in the settlers' eyes, this pathetic interloper brings with him a powerful aura of the untamed and therefore inherently inimical space surrounding their land. The resemblance between Malouf's colonizers and their nineteenth century fictional counterparts, is unmistakable. Referring to Buchan's novel, *Preseter John*, Brian V-Street makes the point that 'the incomprehensibility of the 'natives' and their lack of enlightenment are seen in turn of night time and darkness. That is, as contrasted with the certain light of dawn and the familiar landscape of one's own homeland, Africa represented for many Englishmen a 'dark immorality' (24).

Once 'captured' by Lachlan and taken in by the boy's aunt and uncle, Elen and Jock McIvor, Gemmy's remaining in the British families can only be described as being on sufferance. In direct contrast with the aborigines who, it will be revealed analeptically, had accepted the extraordinary white channelling on the beach with minimal resistance and admirable good grace, Gemmy's compatriots respond to his presence with 'open hostility' (37). They consider him with the utmost distrust and constantly subject him to 'silent scrutiny' (37). It is not that they dispute his British origins – on the contrary, the story they are able to piece together from his queer, deformed snatches of English offers them a convincing enough explanation for his bizarre appearance and outlandish manner. Paradoxically, it is removing the tattered remnants of his naval uniform to present as a kind of metonymic token of his Anglo-Saxon heritage, that Gemmy draws their attention not only to his nakedness, but even more alarmingly, to the savages' innocent unawareness of his naked state.

Please note that the contrast between Gemmy's unselfconscious nakedness and the embarrassed indignation that nakedness provokes in the settlers is a fairly straight forward reference to the Eden myth. What Malouf seems to be suggesting here is that it is the settlers, with their 'superior' knowledge, their more advanced technology and their evolutionarily more mature status, who are responsible for introducing sin and corruption into the paradisaical innocence of Australia that existed prior to their arrival on the continent.

As a result, the dominant sensation that they retain of their first encounter with Gemmy is not the surprise of discovering that the latter is, despite all indications to the contrary, 'one of them'. What fills their thoughts and haunts their collective consciousness is the deeply troubling fact that the hermetic barriers within which their embattled community lives have been breached by a stranger who has spent more than a decade and a half in the company of a primitive people. Even a humane and sympathetically drawn character like Ellen McIvor is shown to harbour anxieties, wondering nervously when Gemmy calls out in the night – 'what dream out of the dark world he had lived in had come back to claim or he had gone to meet.' (79) But for the majority of the settlers, mistrust of Gemmy centres on the far more specific suspicion that he may, in his waking hours, continue to maintain contact with his adoptive tribe and be passing on information to them. From their point of view, knowing that Gemmy has been with blacks for over half his life learning their 'lingo' and 'all their secrets, all the abomination they went in for.' (39), can only mean, at the very least, that his racial and cultural loyalties are in doubt. 'Was he in league with the blacks? As infiltrator, as spy? (38) is the question that endlessly exercises the settlers' minds.... Worse still is the appalling possibility that he may be out of

touch with his racial origins'. 'He had started out white', they readily concede, but the crucial point is 'had he remained' white?' (40)

Compared with even the youngest child in the settlement, his ability to communicate in English is pathetically inadequate and that flagrant linguistic incompetence naturally raises in their minds the possibility of a much greater and far less acceptable deficiency – the loss of his original cultural identity.

The expression 'he isn't all there' normally used to signify simple-mindedness in an individual is shown, for example, to have, for some of the settlers, a more sinister connotation when it is applied to Gemmy, since they are convinced that, even when he is talking with them in the flesh, in full sunlight, his spirit is 'halfway gone, across a line, like the horizon, that was not to be fixed in real space' (38). He does not, in other words, exist in the same socio-cultural dimension as they do.

Their willingness to entertain the idea that Gemmy's identity as a white Anglo-Saxon might not only have been significantly modified but completely erased by his subsequent experience of living among Australian's indigenous population has a resounding significance in the novel. For what it throws very prominently into relief is both the settlers' belief in the strength of aboriginal culture and, at the same time, their corresponding absence of faith in the power of their own racial and cultural heritage to resist, by and of itself, the insidiously eroding influences of the country they are striving to refashion after the image of their native land.

If we examine, for example, their reaction to Gemmy's so called 'native look,' we see that their initial responses to come up with a plausible theory for it. Adopting Mr. Frazer's line of reasoning, they explain it variously as resulting from the aboriginal diet, by the facial adjustments he has been required to make in speaking the different languages of the native tribes or by a conscious attempt on his part to gain acceptance from the tribe through the mimetic assumption of their facial expressions. But what lies exposed ultimately once this tide of rational explanation recedes, are the jutting contours of the colonizers' neurosis; the perpetually undermining sensation of living – 'in a place that had not yet revealed all its influences upon them.' (41) and which might ultimately therefore lead to their undergoing the same degrading metamorphosis that has transformed Gemmy from a civilized human being into a savage. After all, as one of them nervously reminds the rest 'wasn't it true(...) that white men who stayed too long in China, were inclined to develop, after a time, the slanty eyes and flat faces of your yellow man, your Chinese?' (41) When he is looked at from that perspective, it is easy to understand why Gemmy is the incarnation of their secret fears, the living proof of what prolonged exposure to the native elements of Australia will do to a civilized white. **Victorian society was, as Brian V. Street reveals in his study, haunted by the idea that environmental influences might, in certain circumstances, be strong enough to subvert or even overcome the sacrosanct power of racial heredity. Even men of science were capable of asserting in such learned journals as 'Anthropology Review' that European settlers in America were degenerating to a point where they were likely to become as low as the Red Man.** It was, as Street observes: '... a constant fear of sojourners in savage lands, including missionaries, that they would succumb to their savage environment.' (116)

Unable to offer his fellow countrymen any clear, unequivocal signs that would help them to see him as a white man, Gemmy 'become(s) in their eyes black' (41). For, while the imprint of his racial origins is no longer immediately discernible, the stamp of the aboriginal tribe upon him is, by contrast, both blatant and apparently ineradicable. The lingering taint and odour of what, to the settlers, is his debasing association with blacks cannot be removed no matter how hard Ellen Melvor scrubs away at his clothes: 'he had kept the smell he came with, which was the smell of my all half-meat, half-mud, a reminder, a depressing one, of what there might be in him that could not be reclaimed' (41)

As to why, when the influence of British civilization has proved so demonstrably ephemeral, the colonizers should ascribe such strength and indelibility to the mark left by aboriginal culture, the answer is to be found in the comprehensive representation David Malouf offers in his novel of the colonialist's vision of the world.

What is made clear as the narrative develops is that, even if the settlers are prepared to consider Gemmy himself as harmless, they cannot overlook the primordial fact that he constitutes a direct link to that dimension of the country they inhabit that terrifies them. He is, first and foremost, a constant reminder of realities (like the massacre of nineteen whites at Comet River), they would rather forget. As such, the mere sign of him in their midst has the power to disquiet, disorientate and thoroughly destabilize them.

In common with all colonialists, the British who colonized Australia were possessed of a manichean vision of the world in which they strove to implant themselves. Colonized territory, as they saw it, and as it is evoked for us through successive focalizers in Malouf's novel, is composed of two antithetical and grossly disproportionate parts. On the one hand, there is the spatially limited, fenced-in area they have claimed for themselves by ridding, stripping, denuding it of all its original features.

Please note that this is the purpose of colonization for its agents – the ruthless excision of the indigenous so that the transplantation foreign body,' of the colonizer's culture make take root and flourish. On the other, is the infinitely vaster, unconfined and ever-threatening-to engulf space occupied wholly by native and therefore alien elements. In passages that may be said to express the settler's point of view, this latter space is, as we have already had occasion to note, consistently referred to in language that underlines its dark, dreadful and primeval nature.

In the eyes of the white community, other remote centres of colonisation that are dotted along the coast line of north-east Australia, clinging like so many tiny barnacles to the outer, seaward rim of the continent's massive land mass, are separated by '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' (8) The deliberate emotional restraint which permits that statement alerts us to the undertow of fear and insecurity that it is its ostensible purpose to conceal.

Having uprooted themselves from their homeland where evidence of their civilization, the matrix of their socio-cultural identity had been omnipresent (in all their lives till they came here, they had never ventured, most of them, out of sight or earshot of a village strple that, as they stooped to carry stooks and lean them one against the other; was always there when they looked up...' (9) the British settlers in Queensland are psychologically adrift in a context which offers no recognizable cultural landmarks, a topography they have no means of decoding or of relating to their own experience. 'out here the very ground under their feet was strange. It had never been ploughed'(9)

The insight we are given into Ellen McLor's occasionally devastating feelings of alienation constitutes the most sympathetic depiction of the settlers' situation that Malouf offers in his novel. The anguish that fills her at such times, derives, the narrator indicates from 'the absence of ghosts', 'the fearful loneliness of the place' (10) what she misses most are the tactile and visible signs of a cultural heritage that has always provided her in the past with her sense of the world.

'... a threshold worn with the coming and going of feet, hedges between fields that went back a thousand years and the names even further, most of all, the names on headstones, which were their names, under which lay the bones that had made their

bones and given them breath. They would be the first dead here. It made death that much lonelier, and life lonelier too.' (110-111)

In direct contrast to the sensitivity and legitimate angst ascribed to Ellen McIvor is the rest of the community's response to the unassimilable strangeness of their environment. True to the colonial paradigm, their collective gut reaction is fundamentally aggressive. They set about the systematic elimination of all that is alien with the aim of creating in its place some replica of the world they have left behind their mania for 'Stripping (the land) as soon as [they] could manage, of every vestige of the native; for ring barking and clearing and reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a wee bit like home. (10) naturally involves them the outset in an extraordinarily destructive relationship with the land they are colonizing. And yet, the text affirms, their strategy is a singularly futile one, since it fails to prevent them from falling prey to the 'unnerving knowledge' that the land they have cleared was, until a very short time ago 'on the other side of things, part of the unknown.' (9, *Emphasis mine*). and might still, notwithstanding all their relentless efforts to tame it by neutralizing its latent menace 'have the last of mystery upon it, in jungle brakes between paddocks and ferny places out of the Sun.' (10) Like all colonialist ventures, the scale of the enterprise they have embarked upon is too vast, too ambitious to be realizable. How can these deracinated and insecure people entertain any realistic hope of ever authentically possessing a land which, in their own vision of it, is already occupied by a preternaturally ubiquitous indigenous population 'traipsing this way and that all over the map [...] forever encroaching on boundaries ... (9)?

Malouf's answer to that rhetorical question is that, whatever their official discourse might suggest, the colonizing community is only too well aware of the fact that, in diametric opposition to their own situation (in which they cannot guarantee), the native peoples of Australia move around unimpeded by barriers in a boundless universe where they are manifestly at home. Even the restricted living space on which the British families have laboured to engrave the unequivocal signs of possession is penetrated by aborigines if it happens to include part of the latter's ancestral hunting - grounds. Like the North American Indians who believed that land was gift from the creator and could not be pressed by individual humans, the nomadic blacks do not possess the code with which to decipher the message of ownership that the white man's fences are intended to convey! Consequently they continue to cross through them 'in the shadowy way of those whose minds you cannot touch' (100-101). Similarly, in the dark hours, when there are neither shotguns nor 'the glow of the white man's authority' (9) to keep them out, the aborigines wander wherever they please, failing to acknowledge the existence of any barrier whose purpose is to exclude them. Thus, outside the daylight hours, the land so arduously cleared by the settlers is felt by them to revert to its alien, hostile state. For the 'humanizing' influence brought to bear on the landscape by the sound of the white man's voice is extinguished at night and in its place noises of an altogether different, 'unidentifiable' and, by implication, inhuman nature can be heard asserting the separate, autonomous existence of a land and a people beyond the colonizer's control that fills them, the narrator observes, with the very strong sense of 'being submerged, of being hidden away in the depth of the country, but also lost' (9)

As had been plainly indicated at the very beginning of narrative through Lachlan's reaction to the idea that the settlement is being raided by blacks ('After, so many false alarms it had come,' (2, *Emphasis mine*), the settlers live in the constant fear that '...at any moment [...] they might be over whelmed' (42). But the following graphic image gives us a much more vivid sense of the feelings of insecurity that erode the mental equilibrium of the white community: 'the stoutest of them stepping under the stars to take a piss before bed, all unbuttoned and exposed to the night would feel his balls shrink at the crack of a twig, and tuck himself away without even troubling to shake the last drops off (42). And in Barney Mason we are able to see the damage suffered by a man perpetually thrown off balance by 'his own unhappy sense that the world was preparing at any moment to tear away from him the last vestige of security (103)

Here, then is the cause of the paranoia that gnaws away of Malouf's settlers. It is the overwhelming, sensation of being outside one's own element in the face of an enemy who is consummately at home and at ease in his. The very authority of the colonial administration itself (as symbolized by the legal documents in the Lands office in Brisbane, which bear the names of individual land owners) is, the narrator suggests, no match in the settler's mind for the obscure poems he himself confers upon the aborigine in tacit recognition of the latter's symbiotic relationship with the territory over which he ceaselessly roams.

This is also the point at which the trajectory of Malouf's settlers may be seen to diverge radically from that followed by the conventional heroes of nineteenth century fiction. For though, as we have seen, the settlers in *Remembering Babylon* exhibit many of the key responses towards the colonial experience that prevailed both in Victorian society and is much of the literature of the period after is absent from Malouf's post colonial evocation of Australia's colonizers is the mythologization of the imperial culture. This is why his characters who are essentially working-class refugees fleeing the grinding oppression of Britain's Industrial Revolution, are not endowed with the reserves of innate superiority on which the upper-class heroes of Buchan's or Ballantyne's or Haggard's or Henry's novels draw in order to triumph over hostile populations and insalubrious environments. The tension emanating from the opposition between the psychological insecurity and precarious circumstances in which Malouf's settlers struggle to survive and the strength of the supernatural forces with which those same settlers believe aboriginal society to be empowered constitutes, moreover, the main source of the energy that drives the narrative forward.

Though none of them has any empirical evidence of male-violence on the part of the blacks, the whites are nonetheless incapable of dissociating the latter from the profoundly intimidating characteristics that they ascribe to the mostly devilish country they are in the process of colonising. Any chance encounter with an aborigine thus triggers off feelings of sheer terror: Even in broad daylight, to come face to face with one of them, stepping out of nowhere, out of the earth it might be, or a darkness they move in always like a cloud was a test of a man's capacity to stay firm on his own two feet when his heart was raising'. (42) One of the fundamental prepositions underpinning the narrative is in fact, that in the fragile and beleaguered psyche of Australia's white colonisers, the aborigine is not simply like all indigenous people in the eyes of their colonisers, the personification of alterity, the distilled essence of the unknown and unknowable other. With his 'sooty blackness beyond black' (43) and his indecipherable, unconscionably alien way of life, he is perceived. Malouf shows, as the ultimate, most terrifying of bogeymen. So while they may be consumed by night terrors and traumatized by the unpredictable, havoc wreaking violence of rainstorms and cyclones, the settlers nonetheless consider the natives as constituting the greatest threat to their survival for they are: 'worse, than weather and deepest night.' (9)

Lacking the exalted heroic stature (and the unassailable self confidence) conferred by imperialist discourse on the colonizers who tamed the dark continents of Victorian fiction, the whites in *Remembering Babylon* are handicapped by a fatal weakness. At the first sight of the aborigine's timeless and challenging gaze, their faith in their own racial superiority, in the power of western civilisation itself, is seen to wither impotently away. Brought face to face with what he was chosen to consider as a mere savage, Malouf's settler finds himself unable not to recognize their shared origins. And compared with the colossus of their common humanity, the civilisation, perceived by him hitherto as constituting both the source and bastion of his own superior identity, suddenly appears as flimsy and superficial as the proverbial fig leaf. This dawning realization that his culture might after all be nothing more than a decorative veneer beneath which he continues to exist in the same fundamentally primitive state as the natives whom he views with such repulsion and contempt rocks the settler to his very ontological foundations. To use the school master George

Abbot's words the life led by the aborigines 'inspired nothing but a kind of horror at what human nature might in its beginnings spring from, and in such a place so easily sink back to' (51). It is the profoundly destabilizing possibility of such appalling degeneration that Gemmy's presence constantly evokes for the already insecure British community and which drives them, ultimately to the acts of physical and psychological aggression that will hound him from the settlement.

And yet, despite the state of collective paranoia that the narrator describes, the whites' hostility towards Gemmy is neither entirely uniform nor completely unanimous. Dissonant voices do exist and, occasionally make themselves heard. Even in the discourse of the vociferous majority we may detect the existence of a contrapuntal theme. At variance with the prevailing, genocidal impulse to go out and get rid of 'em, once and for all" (62) that seems to be the inevitable concomitant of all major acts of colonization, there are these of the milder' colonialist tradition whose sole aim is endeavouring to extract information from Gemmy is to facilitate their exploitation of the natives by incorporating the latter more efficiently into their predestined positions in the colonial world as labourers and servants. But the only genuine dissension from the hard core colonialist point of view is expressed by Gemmy's reluctant host, Jock Melvor, and by the minister, Mr. Frazer, who may be said to represent, respectively, the decency of the common man and the humanitarian Christian tradition.'

Though Jock cannot himself bear either the touch or even the proximity of Gemmy, an inherent moral rectitude prevents him from allowing himself to be swept away by the burgeoning paranoia that inflames the imagination of the rest of the community. The irony is that it is in scornfully reminding his compatriots of the superior power of their shotguns compared with the derisory nature of any conceivable threat posed by the aborigines that Jock becomes suddenly aware of the meaninglessness of such an argument. For the point is, he realizes, neither he nor they, have faith in that power: 'all their education, their know-how, yes, and the shotguns they carried-might not be enough against what? Some vulnerability to the world that could only be measured, was measured still; by the dread it evoked in them?' (105) Unlike the heroes of nineteenth-century colonialist fiction, who are not only convinced of the supremacy of firearms over any kind of native weapon but are eager to prove it to superstitions 'savages' at the drop of a hat, Jock and his fellow countryman are seen here to doubt the power of their civilisation's technology to subdue the supernatural forces they attribute to the indigeneous peoples of Australia. Thus at the very moment he tries to persuade his friend, Barney, that what differentiates white from aborigines is the former's rational thinking, Jock is himself invaded by the irrational fear that he might have set forces in action, out there, just by breathing into the air the mere possibility' (105)

This, I believe, is the reason why, despite their manifest contempt for the indigeneous inhabitants of Australia, the British Settlers are portrayed, through their visceral rejection of Gemmy, as evincing a willingness to entertain the hypothesis that aboriginal culture might leave a stronger, more lasting trace upon the human personality than their own what it comes down to in the end is the horrified recoil of the ordered, disciplined, rational Victorian mind at what it perceives as the invasive, uncontrollable meanderings of the unconscious.

The white settlement, enclosed within boundaries, compartmentalized stripped of all natural, spontaneous growth, represents the austere virtues of reason so valued by nineteenth century Anglo-Saxon culture. The vast, uncharted wilderness over which the aborgines wander uninhibitedly, violating the settler's space with impunity clearly corresponds, on the other hand, to the obscure, anarchic power of the idea that so terrorised the late Victorians. It is precisely that fear of the unbridled unconscious that is expressed by nineteenth century colonialists, both real and fictional. When they speak of heir dread of what Molly M. Mahood refers to as '.... continual downward pull of savagery.'

But though Jock is, in some respects, dismayed by his estrangement from his former friends, his alienation is not depicted in entirely negative terms. He is shown for example to discover himself a stronger, more sharply defined identity, a singular self over shadowed hitherto by his desire for acceptance by the group to which he felt he belonged. And Jock and Ellen's emotional response to the panorama they see from the top of the ridge overlooking the settlement ('the boundaries of their own land...') had grown clearer to them in their recent difficulties (109) seems to be a fairly transparent metaphorical allusion to the couple's heightened perception of themselves as individuals.

Interestingly, this new sense of identity is also shown to kindle in Jock a greater responsiveness to his surroundings, opening him up at last to the pleasure to be derived from what was previously a source of deep anxiety, the very strangeness of the Australian continent. As long as he had remained 'wrapped' in his 'sociable self' he had been impervious to the appeal of the country in which he is struggling merely to carve out a living. But once the cocoon of group identity has been peeled away, laying bare his individual sensibility, he is seen to develop an infinitely more sensitive relationship with his adopted habitat. His discovery of hundreds of tiny iridescent insects is experienced by him as a lightness... like a form of knowledge he had broken through to. It was unnameable, which disturbed him, but was also exhilarating; for a moment he was entirely happy' (107). There is in him a new found ecstasy in natural phenomena exemplified in the lines that follow which helps to soothe his nagging ache for the familiar topography of 'home; and reconcile him at last to the loss of his native land;

It was just on sunset; All the western sky was drenched in flame and the daylight moon, the wrong way round, hung colourless, almost transparent, in a blaze of such resplendence that you felt small, almost dwarfed before it. He turned his face to her and was transparent himself (109).

But the therapeutic virtues of such rapture are, as Jock's very singularity attests, unknown to the vast majority of Australia's early settlers for whom the uniqueness of that continent's flora and fauna merely fostered the disconcerting conviction that they had landed in a freakish part of the globe, inferior in all respects, to the world they had left behind.' Seeing their environment exclusively in terms of how they could exploit, it was naturally a further bar to their benefiting from the kind of healing delight in the country's natural phenomena that Jock experiences.

In taking with them to the new world all the cultural, social and geographical references of the old, the British who colonized Australia created around themselves a kind of opaque, impermeable bubble which effectively cut them off from all direct contact with their new homeland. Clearly, it is a point which has a far wider application than the specific context in which it is used in *'Remembering Babylon'*. To quote Brian V. Street.

Physical separation could be overcome far more easily than the moral and psychological separation between Europeans and the native inhabitants of those distant lands.

This separation from the local inhabitants is sustained by memories of loved ones at home, enabling the traveller to cut out his mind the land he is actually in. The emotional link is only with his own culture which he thus brings with him to the alien environment. (27)

The radical geographical and cultural dislocation that colonization demanded invariably produced a pathological defensiveness on the part of its proponents. Banding together the better to ward off the multiple assaults on their vulnerable sense of identity, they immured themselves behind the impenetrable ramparts of an expatriate society that was not only irrelevant to but fundamentally at war with the

country they were colonizing. The kind of cultural autism that this engendered was, as Malouf's novel demonstrates, one of the main reasons for the inevitable failure of colonial ventures.

'Sociable in temperament', 'it went against his nature to be at odds with his friends.' (108), Jock is nevertheless expelled from the bubble as a result of his choosing to dissociate himself from actions and attitudes that he finds morally unpalatable. Mr. Frazer, the other main dissenting voice in the narrative, is, by contrast a natural outsider. A benign if slightly eccentric cleric with a passion for botany, he is automatically set apart from his fellow countrymen by the enthusiasm of his response to the exoticism of the north Queensland landscape. The knowledge of the natural world that Gemmy has absorbed during his time with the aborigines is considered by the minister as being of inestimable value and he applies himself to the recording of it with a quasi—missionary zeal. It is, in fact, through the medium of Mr. Frazer that the main ideological thrust of the novel is developed; firstly by means of the speculation he indulges in when writing in his journal and secondly via the episode in which he goes to Brisbane to talk to the Governor about Gemmy.

To take the first of those two points, Mr. Frazer argues cogently in his 'Writing—up book' in order to dispel, the myth of the 'hostile and infelicitous' (129) image of Australia that is propagated through colonialist discourse. It is his fervent belief that the widespread practise of stripping the land of its natural features is a grievous mistake. If the settler's impression of his new environment is an inimical one, it is, the minister reasons, because of the former's distorted vision which, in turn, is caused by his having imported with him into the colony codes and references which have no 'relevance there. If moreover, the first colonizers starved in the midst of plenty, it was previously because they could not with their English eyes perceive, [what was all around them], since the very habit and faculty that makes apprehensible to us what is known and expected dulls our sensitivity to other forms, even the most obvious' (129—130) But Mr. Frazer is realist enough to recognize that the defectiveness of the settlers' perception of the world is by no means accidental. He detects a kind of refractory pride in it; an insistence that if the land will not present itself to us in terms that we know, we would rather die than take it as it is (130). Emphasizing the futility of such intransigence while at the same time stressing the necessity of accepting 'what is there' of learning and assimilating the invaluable knowledge of their environment that the indigenous inhabitants have to offer, the minister proposes Gemmy as a potential source of inspiration to his countrymen since he explains, in allowing himself to be at home here, he has crossed the boundaries of his given nature.' (132) The radical message embedded in the reverend's Christian discourse is that, for the British colonists in Australia, the price of successful integration is no less than the relinquishment of their socio—cultural identity. It is only, his argument implies, by severing the residual analytical cord that attaches them to the homeland that they will ever be in a position to come to terms with the intimidatingly different conditions of life that obtain in the colony. Gemmy, the example he offers, is on Mr. Frazer's own words, 'no longer a white man, or a European, whatever his birth.' (132)

It is, of course, a doomed message that Mr. Frazer endeavours to impart, as is eloquently demonstrated in the episode describing his failure to enlist government backing for his heavily symbolic project of cultivating native Australian species of fruit. Though the two men he seeks support from to help him implement his vision represent a vastly more elevated social and educational stratum than that of the proletarian settlers they have, the narrative contrives unequivocally to show, the same fundamentally negative impact on the country as the ignorant, narrow—minded human flotsam they are there to govern. Sir George Bowen, Governor of Queensland is a middle—class parvenu, a 'monstrously ambitious' civil-servant who has no interest in the country other than as a vehicle for furthering his career. His flamboyant, militaristic dashing about the unpaved streets of Brisbane epitomise the vacuous ostentatiousness of imperialism. The epithets ('peevish' 'overbearing', 'grandiloquent') used by the narrator to characterize Sir George's behaviour may also be seen, by association, to apply to the 'distant almost unapproachable power' (166)

he is, said to embody. In the eyes of this pompous, paranoid, incurably ethnocentric representative of government, aborigines are 'creatures, only recently redeemed from nakedness, whose minds are still sunk in unfathomable night' (169) Seeing himself in the same heroic terms as those attributed to the colours of Algeria in the mythologizing discourse of that arch—imperialist Louis Bertrand' he believes that he is 'a kind of imperial demurrage, out of mere rocks and air creating spaces where history may now occur' (168)

The thesis that Malouf invites us to consider finally is this: however disparate their cultural or socio—economic provenance might be, colonized country as it exists in reality, its own distinctive geographical identity, its own physiologically and culturally adopted indigenous peoples. What men like Sir George choose to see is a vacuum which they are going to fill, a blank page on which they will inscribe their glorious history, an empty, uninhabited landscape which they will populate, cultivate and build on when Sir George himself looks at the immense territory his government has chosen to name 'Queensland' his blinked eyes are hungry for signs that will lend themselves to his obsessive allusions to another, vastly different cultural tradition: "Your town, 'he writes to his patron, Lord Cardwell, of the little mosquito - infested port in the north on which he has settled the great man's name, lies in a position analogous to that of Thermo pylae; that is, at the north end of the Australian Epirus." (169) 'Analogy', the narrator drily asserts, is his drug. He finds it everywhere.' (169).

The Premier, Mr Herbert, an English aristocrat who is more discreet, less volatile in his demeanour than Sir George, is shown to be no less pernicious an influence on the territory he administrates. The only character in the novel who can, truly be said to represent the social class to which the heroes of nineteenth century colonialist literature belong, Mr. Herbert is, in the portrait Malouf offers of him, singularly devoid of the traditional heroic qualities. Languid, effete and irredeemably self—centred, he has none of the moral fibre ideological zeal and downright spunk that are seen to motivate his fictional predeceases. He considers his term in Queensland merely as an 'adventure of the youth' (172) of which is weary. The home which he shares with a fellow Oxonian is 'a Horatian retreat (...) from the rough and tumble of colonial democracy, which he does not believe in' (172)

His fifty acres of Cambridgeshire' has been used to grow English produce and, the narrator confidently predicts, 'once he leaves it, he will not revisit.' (173) Australia has provided him with the raw material for an interesting experiment, a suitably uplifting hobby for a noble Englishman. He has transformed a sub—tropical wilderness into a lush cultivated country estate, but beyond that self—gratifying project he has no more interest in the land or its people than the common settler has.

Having gone to the state capital in the hope of persuading those in and with power to embark on the visionary project of encouraging the colonists themselves to adapt to their new environment rather than disfigure it to conform to their own inappropriate expectations. Mr. Frazer returns home dazed and defeated: 'The orchards he had foreseen receded into a future that appeared increasingly remote' (175). In the version Malouf presents in his novel, colonial society is, from its lowest ranks to its highest echelons, psychologically and ideologically committed to destroying the identity of the country on which it imposes itself.

Alone of all the white protagonists, Gemmy is shown to have succeeded in blending into and becoming an integrated part of the geographical and cultural environment into which his hitherto picaresque existence has ineluctably propelled him. Not that there is any morally edifying purpose ascribed to Gemmy's achievement. The point of view from which he is seen to operate is essentially a pragmatic one.

There was no way of existing in this land, of walking your way through it, unless you took into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked up all the

various parts of it and made them one. Without that you were blind, you were deaf, as he had been, at first, in their world.(65)

What motivates him in his initial contact with the aboriginal tribe that discovers him is presented as being nothing more exalted than the survival instinct itself.

The keys to Gemmy's rapid integration are firstly his age ('He was a child with a child's quick capacity to take things in and the street child's gift for mimicry.' (25—26) and, secondly, the flexibility with which youth is endowed: '[he] he let himself be gathered into a world which, though he was alarmed at first by its wildness, proved no different in essence from his previous one,' (26) Conversely, precisely because Gemmy is young and malleable he is 'young enough also to forget' (26). This is why, in acquiring the languages of his hosts, he loses what derisory knowledge of the English language he formerly possessed.

Significantly, the loss of his nature tongue is equated, in the narrator's reconstruction of events, with the disintegration of his original cultural identity; for the point Malouf seems intent on making here is that the cultural framework or *de'cor* to which language inevitably and abundantly refers cannot remain intact without the words that construct and support it. Once Gemmy has lost his grip on the signifier, the signified also eludes him: 'He would see it clearly enough[...] but no word was connected to [it] and when his mind reached for it, the object too went thin on him.' (27) Deprived of the nourishing lifeblood of language, the original 'text' of the palimpsest that Malouf's tragi-comic protagonist represents fades as the new 'text' inscribes itself.

But if Gemmy's memory of his former identity is seen to slip from his consciousness, there is no-evidence in the narrative to suggest that the acquisition of a second culture has effaced that identity completely. Retreating to an inner recess of his unconscious mind, his British self is seen merely to lie dormant, leaving Gemmy with the disorientating sensation that there is within him 'a different story [...] which had another shape and might need, for its telling, the words he had had in his mouth when they had first found him, and had lost; though not, he thought, for ever.' (27-28). The fact that rumours of the presence of whites near the area he is living in disturbs Gemmy to the point where he cannot rest until he has sought them out provides tacit confirmation of the idea that some sense of his racial identity remains alive in him.

There is one further point worth noting concerning this episode. What is shown to reactivate Gemmy's memory as he skulks around the settlement searching for signs that will restore his socio-cultural origins to him is a succession of the most banal and concrete phenomena. There is, it seems, a deliberate intention on the author's part to develop the idea that the cultural identity of a people, the essence of what it feels itself to be, bears little relation to the lofty abstractions of Art and Civilisation that featured notably in the self-legitimizing discourse of colonialists and continue to flourish today in conventional conceptions of what 'culture' is about. What he shows us through Gemmy's experience is that it is the smell of horse-dung on a path, the sound of an axe striking wood, the sight of a woman pegging out washing on a clothesline – in short the unexceptional, everyday features of an individual's existence – that constitute the fabric of what may be called his native culture. The point is given a retrospective piquancy by the preposterously, exalted images of the colonizer's civilisation that its grandiloquent apologist, Sir George, is seen to be obsessively engaged in fabricating.

In a parodic reformulation of Provost's experience with the tea soaked Madeleine, Gemmy's imprisoned memory of the earlier 'text' of his childhood self is finally released by the taste of soaked mush that someone has thrown out to feed the hens:

The creature whose dreams he stared came right up to the surface of him. It fed on the saltiness of the stuff, and for a moment entirely took possession of him. He saw things through its eyes in bewildering flashes; and found himself shaken with sobs.

but where the tears came from so suddenly, and why he could not tell. A stranger, a child it might be, who had never wept, was weeping in him.' (31)

But though Gemmy is seen here to make contact with his past, the images used to be the experience are of such a manifestly schizoid nature that we can only conclude that there has been no merger or continuity between his original identity and that which, as a result of his long immersion in aboriginal culture, has been superimposed upon it. The two 'texts' are presented as separate, serial, mutually impermeable strata of a fractured psyche.

It is, I think, of considerable significance that, as Gemmy struggles to close the gap between himself and his elusive native culture, it is language or, more precisely, the almost literal absorption of words as physical objects that is intuitively felt, by him as being able to provide the vital link. Pressing himself up against the hut of a family of settlers, listening to the incomprehensible sounds of their conversation, he is convinced that, if only he can get near enough to swallow the words as they leave the speakers' mouths, he will be able to capture and possess their meaning: 'If he could get the words inside him, as he had the soaked mush, 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.' (32) The gloss we are invited to put on that somewhat enigmatic declaration is, as I understand it, that Gemmy's movement towards white society is prompted solely by an attempt to retrieve the largely effaced text of his original identity and not by any desire to be re-absorbed by or reintegrated into that society.

There is nothing in the narrator's account to suggest any impulsion on Gemmy's part to abandon the aboriginal way of life he has shared since being jettisoned by his fellow countrymen some sixteen years earlier. For Gemmy, it is simply a matter of 'recovering the connection that would put the words back in his mouth, and catch the creature, the spirit or whatever it was, that lived in the dark of him' (32-33). In leaving the cover of the ti-tree swamped to run to the boundary fence of the settlement his only objective is to gain recognition for the Anglo-Saxon part of himself. He wants to prove that all that separated him from them was ground that could be covered.' (33)

When, therefore, some alien voice from deep inside him stutters 'do not shoot. I am a B-b-british object' (33), his reaction is one of astonishment and betrayal. The 'creature' has revealed, suddenly, an independent and treacherous will of its own, and it is that, the reader is led to understand, which has enticed him to where he is, balanced symbolically on the fence between the two cultures that have successively and in their hugely different ways inscribed themselves upon him. For, from that unstable vantage point, what Gemmy sees are the metaphorical representations of his dual identity, 'all swamp and forest one way, raw clearings, the other' (33). The substitution of 'object' for 'subject' is clearly no innocent slip of the tongue on the part of the linguistically deficient enunciator. It is the author's voice intervening here to indicate that his protagonist, poor damaged goods that he is, (the narrator refers to him as 'a man who had suffered a good deal of damage' (7) is very much a socially manufactured article, the product of his bleak, de-humanized, Dickensian childhood in 'civilized' Britain. The problem that the 'Made in England' label that would normally confirm his country of origin must have faded during his long years under the Australian sun, or perhaps it has been concealed by the unfamiliar characters of the script that overlays it for it is manifestly no longer visible to his British compatriots.

It is for that reason that Gemmy's yearning to obtain acceptance for his identity as a white Anglo-Saxon is destined never to be satisfied. In the eyes of the British families, he is no more than 'a parody of a white man' (39), and, white they feel. It is their duty 'to bring him back. If it was feasible, to being a white man' (39), they are deeply pessimistic about the outcome of such an endeavour. More pertinently, if, after

several months spent in the settlement, Gemmy himself is at all uncertain as to which of the two 'texts' that comprise him constitutes the stronger, more legible manuscript. that uncertainty is definitively dispelled by the visit, he is paid by two members of his adoptive tribe.

During the silent communion that succeeds the exchange of formalities between Gemmy and the aborigines come to reclaim him from the 'ghostly white creatures' he is currently living among Gemmy's spirit is transported to the sites of his former wanderings. And in the long, lyrical passage that describes his psychic return to the tribe's home territory is made clear that this is the real locus of his identity since it is, the narrator insists, through the recognition of that landscape's vibrant and cherished features that Gemmy feels 'the energy flow back into him' (11). His sudden recovery of the good health that has gradually drained away from him during his stay among the white families forces Gemmy to acknowledge explicitly that 'the air he breathed here did him no good the food too. The ground he walked on jarred at every step. The land up there was his mother, the only one he had ever known,' (118) In common with the aboriginal people who saved his life, Gemmy believes, at last, that the earth beneath his feet is his sole progenitor, the true matrix of his being. Counteracting the healing, revivifying power that the aborigines bring Gemmy, is the toxic discharge emitted by Andy McKillop, the only member of the white community to witness the blacks' visit to the settlement? As Gemmy sees it, Mc Killop represents a source of contamination.

The air around (Gemmy) was immediately infected, sucked into the emptiness (Andy) made just by stepping into it.' (118). Shattered by the force of the virulent – racial antagonism that informs all the thoughts and reflexes of Mc Killop and his ilk. Gemmy is obliged to concede the impossibility of ever reconstituting his identity as a white man. His counter with the deranged settler leaves him with the impression of having 'looked into a pool (...) and seen an image of himself that was all unfocused pieces that would not fit.' (49)

The violent assault to which Gemmy is suspected as a result of Mc Killop's malicious scare mongering among the settlers marks the end of his hopes for recognition from his fellow countrymen. Later, as he sickens in the remembrance of his physically and emotionally abused childhood self, the conviction grows in him that, since his suffering derives from his having allowed his life to be set down on paper by the school master, the only way to put an end to his torment must therefore be to get the sheets of papers back and so retrieve the 'text' of his former existence. And it is through the attitude Gemmy displays towards the manuscript that records his early life history that we are enabled to understand fully the primary of the aboriginal way of seeing in the whiteman – blackman dyad that Gemmy represents. In the episode dealing with his return to the settlement to get back the transcript of the disjointed, autobiographical babble that was extracted from him on his arrival there – an episode which narrated from his point of view, Gemmy is said to be

"going back to claim his life, to find the sheets of paper where all that had happened to him had been set down in the black blood that had so much power over his own, the events, things, people too that sprang to life in them (...). Mugicked into squiggles like the guests of insects under bark, they had drawn the last of his spirit from him. They were drowning him to his death. (176)."

Since Gemmy cannot read, it is obviously of no consequence that the sheets of paper George Abbot hands over to him contain only the ill-written exercises of British school children. All he craves is the symbolic restitution of the 'text' of his tortured Anglo-Saxon self so that he can destroy it and thereby embrace whole heartedly the aboriginal culture with which alone now he can identify. In what is a highly symbolic scene, the part of Gemmy that had been resurrected by the 'magic' of the written record and had disintegrated on contact with the pathological violence of Andy Mc Killop's animosity is shown to be discarded for good. Walking away from the settlement in the rain, Gemmy takes the sodden 'manuscript' from his pocket and

drops it 'like soggy crumbs from his fingers into puddles where he left them, bits all disconnected...' (181) His experience of life in the colonizers' world has resulted in the irreparable dismemberment of his original identity.'

Recounted analeptically in the closing chapter (i.e. Chapter 20) from the distant stand point of Lachlan's and his cousin Janet's old age, Gemmy's death or rather the manner of his dying, reinforces the idea that ultimately, Gemmy's only identity is that provided by the aboriginal tribe into which he succeeded in integrating himself. Searching for news of his erstwhile companion nine years after his disappearance from the settlement, Lachlan hears of a 'dispersal' carried out by settlers some six years previously. Like the 'commando raids' referred to by the sanguinary narrator of J.M. Coetzee's novella, *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* that sanitised term is, in colonialist discourse, the code word for the extermination of indigenous people. The narrator's account of the incident does not make use of such cynical euphemisms. It is, on the contrary, provocatively explicit: 'The blacks had been ridden down and brought to death by blows from a stirrup iron at the end of stirrup leather – an effective weapon, when used at a gallop, for smashing skulls.' (196) Since Gemmy is believed to be one of the victims, it is clear that, to the whites who perpetrated the massacre, he was indistinguishable from the blacks whose existence he shared to the end, as indistinguishable as are his presumed remains among the eight identical parcels of bark to which Lachlan is eventually led by surviving members of the decimated clan.

The main function of the heterodiegetic narrator of *Remembering Babylon*, is, then, to excavate the foundation – social, psychological, and cultural – on which white Australia is built. If this proves an unedifying task, it is because those foundations were eroded from the very beginning by the same moral faultlines that may be seen to traverse all colonial societies. And though the failures of colonisation are seen to be multiple, they can, the novel attests, always be traced to a single unvarying cause, the blinding, and paralysing ethnocentrism of colonisers.

The settlers Malouf portrays are imprisoned both physically and mentally within the unyielding confines of what is known and familiar to them, unable to come to terms with what is there, incapable of reconciling the reality of Australia with the myth of colonisation propagated by the discourse of their culture.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the evolution of Australia's colonial identity into a national identity, the themes of exile and alienation and the Faultlines in the white Australian identity.

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on the evolution of Australia's colonial identity into a national identity.
2. Discuss the theme of exile and alienation as reflected in *Remembering Babylon*.
3. Discuss the various aspects of the faultlines in the white Australian Identity.