

Questioning Human Agency: Recalibrating David Malouf's Remembering Babylon (1993) In The Light Of Postcolonial Ecocriticism

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Abstract

Ecocritical post-colonial research is a nascent discipline within the realm of literary criticism. It integrates the examination of the post-colonial setting in literary works and uncovers a correlation between literature and the environment. Even before the term "ecocriticism" was coined in the realm of literature, writers have always focused on portraying nature as a source of inspiration and a valuable opportunity to develop their thoughts and express them in writing. The word ecocriticism was introduced into literary criticism by the Association of the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1993. Since then, researchers have used this approach to analyse texts and emphasise environmental problems, as well as to examine the ways in which literature can raise awareness in society. Post-colonial ecocritical studies aim to address the intersection of post-colonialism and ecocriticism by examining the environment as a holistic entity encompassing humans, animals, and land. It focuses critical thinking on the connection between humans (both indigenous and foreign) and the land, as well as the link between humans and nonhumans. This paper examines the portrayal of nonhumans in David Malouf's Remembering Babylon (1993) with a view to exploring ecological issues in our contemporary world. The paper also demonstrates how the use of a postcolonial ecocritical paradigm reveals that nonhuman nature, including the human "other" that is

treated as an animal, is subjected to Western ideologies that perceive them as just resources or tools to be exploited. However, the article also demonstrates how the nonhuman “others” are challenging these perspectives by fighting Western practices that idealise rural life and by highlighting environmental dangers.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism, Nonhuman, Other, Environmentalism.

Introduction

Environmental degradation and societal disparities resulting from Western colonial actions are two significant current global issues. David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon* (1993) portrays a British settlement in mid-nineteenth-century Australia, where nature plays a crucial role. Gemmy Fairley and Janet McIvor, the two most significant characters, have a clear and strong connection to the natural world. Gemmy is consistently linked with various animals and serves as a repository of knowledge regarding the local plant life. On the other hand, Janet undergoes the most significant event in the story, the bee-swarming, which deeply impacts her. This suggests that the novel may possess not only postcolonial but also ecocritical importance.

In their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2015), Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin explore the intricate relationship between postcolonial and environmental studies. They argue that this connection is “painfully obvious” due to the undeniable global impact of colonialism and imperialism. These political ideologies, such as nationalism and society, cannot be removed from their geographical context and the exploitation of natural resources, leading to environmental degradation. However, it is difficult to combine these fields due to their challenging nature and lack of consistent fundamental philosophies (Huggan and Tiffin 2). Their parallels lie in their shared focus on social and environmental justice, while their differences arise from the emphasis of postcolonialism on human issues and the focus of ecocriticism on nature. Nevertheless, the boundaries between these divisions are not easily discernible, as postcolonial criticism has a significant background in ecological discourses. Moreover, numerous instances of environmental studies exist

that aim to foster an understanding of cultural disparities (Huggan and Tiffin 3).

Huggan and Tiffin suggest that we look at the imperialistic and colonising ideas that see nature and the animal as resources or services that can be used for profit in order to understand how difficult it is to combine postcolonial and environmental studies. By applying Western farming practices, the settlers aimed to transform the aboriginal people's savage way of life into a lucrative and productive enterprise (Huggan and Tiffin 8). This perspective not only justifies the deliberate deaths of individuals who are considered different but also promotes the belief in the dominance of Western civilization. This includes the superiority of Western animals, flora, and agricultural and pastoral methods, which played a significant role in the destruction of local ecosystems (Huggan and Tiffin 3–7). The process of colonising by seizing land in this manner continues to have a significant influence on both culture and nature, hence establishing entitlement as a crucial idea in postcolonial ecocriticism.

The epigraph in *Remembering Babylon* (1993) comprises two quotations that address the themes of displacement and ecological awareness. Malouf is well-known for his landscape depictions and his ability to illustrate the relationship between human consciousness and place. However, he is often not seen as an environmentally concerned writer (Randall 182–93). Therefore, a more in-depth analysis of these perplexing lines is necessary. The initial quotation is a verse extracted from William Blake's poem "The Four Zoas": "Whether this is Jerusalem or Babylon, we know not". This creates a sense of uncertainty regarding location, as "the sanctified, promised place or the place of exile" (Randall 125). This ambiguity is further emphasised by Blake's own doubts about the West as a place of fulfilment.

In the opening scene of *Remembering Babylon* (1993), three farm children, who are not wearing shoes, are depicted playing in the pasture, evoking a picturesque pastoral vision. This assertion is promptly contradicted by the second, potentially overlooked depiction of the location as "clay-packed stones and ant trails" (Malouf 1), indicating that it is not a picturesque garden-farm but rather an environment associated with laborious tasks. The presence of compacted clay, stones, and ants evokes the challenging conditions of

cultivating such terrain and the inherent risk of crop devastation caused by pests. Furthermore, there is a suggestion of a persistent nonhuman presence, represented by the stable terrestrial environment and the highly prosperous ants, which are among the most thriving species on Earth. The presence of ants has the potential to disrupt a pastoral idyll.

From a postcolonial ecocritical point of view, ants are important because they are thought to make up at least fifteen percent of all land biomass, have more than 12,000 species, and live in colonies and complex societies with complex ways of communicating. Insects, as a whole, can hinder the efforts of Western colonisation by causing damage to crops or by transmitting diseases. In her work titled "Loud with the presence of plants and field life: The Ecology of Fight in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*", Anissa Wardi discusses the importance of ants as an "uncontainable and pervasive" unseen force. She argues that ants symbolise nature's fight against control (Wardi 9). Morrison's ants are displacing sidewalk bricks, consuming the insulation of electricity cables, and causing significant damage to the greenhouse, symbolising humans' dominant authority over nature (Wardi 10).

If we interpret the narrative as a romanticised portrayal of the location, the ants appear to be everywhere, even in the head. When Gemmy joins his Aboriginal friends and they demonstrate to him, "the tribe's home territory, with its pools and creeks and underground sources of water, its rock ridges and scrub, its edible fruits and berries, and flocks of birds and other creatures" (Malouf 107) within the narrow gap separating them, the ants may be observed engaging in their exceptional ability, surpassing that of any other species; diligently shuttling back and forth, transporting various items. The small cohort of individuals employs their imagination and linguistic skills to construct a vivid representation that invigorates Gemmy, akin to a withdrawal to a rural setting, while the ants continuously occupy that realm in reality.

Shortly after this dramatic retreat to the natural environment and brutal mistreatment from certain white settlers, Gemmy reintegrates into his existence with the Aboriginal community. Both Janet and her cousin Lachlan are longing for news of him, even years after his mysterious disappearance. Lachlan, who is currently involved in constructing a highway in the area, is particularly interested in any updates on him. The presence of the highway serves as a

clear indication of the growing urbanisation, where various types of settlements such as harbour towns, gold mining camps, isolated residences near transportation hubs, and lumber or sugar mills are gradually dominating the surrounding environment. The depiction of receding nature in the text implies environmental challenges such as drought, deforestation, and floods. This is evident in the description of rainforests that have dried out, sparsely forested cow land with large anthills, and numerous rivers that experience sudden and intense flooding (Malouf 178). Even in this limited perspective, the ants are discernible, and their abilities are noteworthy as those of the architects of the Tower of Babel. However, the absence of a socially and linguistically established deity means that ants will continue to communicate quietly in a single language. Ants are suitable option for challenging the Western idealization of pastoralism, human superiority over nonhuman beings, the belief in human competency in communication, and creating an inclusive community.

Gemmy, a European individual, has cultivated a profound feeling of attachment to this foreign land. After his aboriginal friends show him a vision of their ancestral land and offer ownership, the protagonist perceives this territory as his only true mother. He believes that he is connected to the land not by birth, but through a spiritual rebirth and a gift. Furthermore, he sees this connection as enduring beyond his lifetime, existing for all of eternity, just as the land itself does. His unity with the land emphasises this profound bond. An image that signifies a strong and intimate bond between humans and the natural world. It suggests that humans may not survive on earth unless they receive greater acknowledgment. Gemmy's expression of these emotions also serves as a criticism of the societal inequalities he experienced during his childhood in Britain.

Upon their initial contact with Gemmy, the children perceive him as intimately connected to the natural environment, like a small part of the ti-tree swamp. Lachlan, misled by this resemblance, mistakenly believes that indigenous people are on their way. The settlers held the belief that the swamp was the dwelling place of all things wild and terrifying and that it was the origin from which the indigenous people would emerge. Swamps have postcolonial significance because they served as a sanctuary for slaves and indigenous people seeking refuge from colonial authorities (Grant). In *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison used the swamp as a rejuvenating

setting for marginalized individuals who are considered the “other” (Wardi 5). The marsh, much like the ants, is not the main emphasis in *Remembering Babylon* (1993), but it remains consistently present on the outskirts of the settlement. The setting serves as the backdrop for Gemmy’s story, marking his initial appearance and eventual disappearance. It also represents the settlers’ fear of the unknown and carries significant metaphorical meaning.

Insects possess distinctive characteristics that set them apart as different entities within the animal kingdom. Similarly, the swamp is notable for its exceptional and unparalleled terrain. According to Howarth, swamps and other types of wetlands are characterised as “hybrid and multivalent,” meaning they are not solely land or water. Wetland ecosystems exhibit exceptional reproductive and regeneration capabilities. The water that permeates through these ecosystems conveys decomposing matter, which consistently deposits fertile silt and transports nutrients downstream (Howarth 521). Wetlands, which encompass six percent of the earth’s land surface, have the potential to provide food for half of the world’s population. Similar to ants, wetlands may be found in every part of the world except Antarctica (Howarth 521).

Historically, people have viewed wetlands with a complex and varied cultural significance. For many centuries, they were regarded as dangerous, useless, fearful, filthy, diseased, and noxious. However, in recent centuries, they have gained a more favourable social perception, associated with qualities such as “beauty, fertility, variety, utility, and fluidity” (Howarth 513). The wetlands’ hybrid nature reflects the settlers’ hybrid identity, while the shift in the socially manufactured concept of wetlands from fear to reverence parallels the change in how certain characters in *Remembering Babylon* (1993) perceive the environment. The historical function of the wetlands as a place of refuge and their uncertain legal status parallel that of the epigraph, serving as either a place of exile or a promised destination.

Furthermore, wetlands have a long-standing record of disputes over ownership rights and ecosystem degradation. In Britain, the preservation and utilisation of wetlands, specifically marshes, were of significant political concern during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A dominant Western perspective saw wetlands as a means to reclaim land.

However, this approach resulted in the extinction of various plant and animal species, particularly birds, and also contributed to the widening socioeconomic disparity between wealthy landowners and the working class (Sipley 21). In the nineteenth century, the pace of development experienced a significant acceleration due to the implementation of steam power, which led to a substantial reduction of marshlands (Sipley 21). Today, we recognise wetlands as valuable ecosystem services that serve as alternatives to waste water treatment plants. They also provide recreational areas and bird habitats. Additionally, wetlands have retained their cultural significance, often depicted in movies as places of refuge and the dwelling of monsters. Malouf provides a concise overview of the Eurocentric perspective on wetland development, highlighting its detrimental impact on the diverse bird population. He also mentions the belief in supernatural occurrences associated with wetlands, describing them as “bird-haunted marshes” (7), suggesting that the vanished birds may be perceived as haunting spirits. We might interpret the marsh in *Remembering Babylon* (1993) as an implied representation of contested land rights and the environmental impact of colonialism and the Industrial Revolution, which includes the eradication of fauna.

The settlers found the swamp to be the most daunting aspect of their environment. It was completely unfamiliar, and even in bright sunlight, it remained impenetrably dark. This mirrored the soul-afflicting void and the juxtaposition of light and darkness mentioned in the epigraph. However, the settlers were also uneasy with other parts of their surroundings. The sounds of this strange nature, particularly at night, evoked a sense of disorientation. These sounds served as a reminder of events that belonged to the history of the land, not one’s own personal history. They hinted at the vast geological eras that the earth has experienced, as well as the questionable presence of humans in that space. However, while pursuing their goal of transforming this “unutilized” property into a productive and lucrative one, the settlers experienced persistent anxiety.

The settlers possess a pragmatic perspective on land and a desire to convert it into pastoral areas. The individuals desire to completely remove any trace of the indigenous culture from the land through practices such as ringbarking and clearing in order to make it resemble their own homeland. This demonstrates their strong belief in their right to the land but

also reveals their lack of connection to it. The tale portrays nature from the perspective of the white settlers, who have a Eurocentric and dominant concept of development that prioritises human interests and treats nonhuman nature as something that can be exploited. Mr. Frazer, the Minster, has a different perspective on the location because he is not involved in farming. He takes solace in the activity of botanizing and derives great pleasure from doing so in the presence of Gemmy, who possesses expertise in identifying edible or otherwise useful plants. After their outings, Mr. Frazer dedicates his evenings to recording his thoughts and theories, including one that explicitly challenges the dominance of Western agricultural methods, as well as the superiority of Western animals and vegetation.

The narrative also portrays the dominance of the European white male and the detrimental consequences associated with this belief through Lachlan's beliefs upon his arrival from Scotland. His cousins introduce him to their preferred flora, such as the eggs-and-bacon bushes, but he disregards them with the statement, "[t]hat is not them." "Those are not the genuine ones" (Malouf 51). He initially dismisses everything that Janet and Meg know as insignificant, but he later comes to the realisation that in order to succeed in this environment, he must familiarise himself with it. This involves hunting various species of birds such as scrub turkey, bronze-wings, topknots, fruit pigeon, and numerous types of ducks that inhabit the swamp. Similar to the recurring presence of ants and other insects in the narrative, birds also make frequent appearances. Furthermore, apart from Lachlan's avian prey and Ellen's geese, the tribe possesses a collection of birds, as well as Mr. Frazer's imported avian species that were previously discussed. Additionally, there are bird calls, intricately designed birdcages belonging to Mrs. Hutchence, and depictions of birds carved onto chests. Ellen also expresses her feeling like a confined bird, while George's hair resembles a bird's nest. Furthermore, the audacious myna birds can be observed pecking around adult Lachlan's boots, and Jock possesses a bird as well.

The novel features a fascinating epigraph that includes quotes. The phrases, both in their origin and content, convey a sense of uncertainty about belonging and also highlight an environmental concern. The portrayals of nonhuman in the novel expose multiple voices that challenge human dominance. A procession of ants disrupts idyllic pastoral

scenes, while hordes of insects trigger transformative experiences in diasporic individuals, leading to a profound appreciation for nature and a heightened sense of inclusion and connection. Honeybees exhibit a level of collective intelligence that is beyond what is achievable by human cultures. The presence of swamps and the erosion of topsoil serve as reminders of the harmful effects of certain agricultural methods. The author's significant discoveries, albeit not fully conclusive, are being politicised by a symbolic figure. However, he is unable to effectively communicate his findings to both the active participants and the governing authority. Mythical hybrids of humans and horses symbolise the impact of the Industrial Revolution and the belief in the dominance of Western civilization. A congregation of avian creatures signifies the insatiable desire of humans to engage in acts of killing, while an assemblage of fragrances evokes recollections of brutality. However, it also serves as a testament to the undeniable similarities between humans and animals. This statement encapsulates a tacit criticism of Western ideas, highlighting their destructive and corrupt nature. This argument encapsulates a tacit collective criticism towards the Western ideas of development, highlighting their destructive and corrupt nature. However, it also presents an opportunity for transformation and resolution. If these efforts fail, there is always the looming possibility of an apocalyptic outcome to be taken into account.

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