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## A Study of Male Identity in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*

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### Introduction

David Malouf is a prominent author of Australian literature. The present research is a study of male identity in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*. The men reflected in *Remembering Babylon* (1993) reveal the Australian ethos, social milieu, and cultural realities of the period when they were being written. As well, his novel elaborates the description of the men's lives, and identity in the Australian society. Although research on men has a long history, within the last 20 years there has been increasing research interest in men, masculinity and the male experience. The present study of male identity revolves around the male in general, society, culture, characteristics of male and different approaches for understanding the male identity as well as what is the identity, gender identity, masculinity and the development of the male identity. Stereotypical real male identity identified with some masculine traits such as strong, independent, achieving, hard working, heterosexual, tough, aggressive, unemotional, physical, competitive and forceful.

### Concept of Male Identity

Up to the recent times male identity was defined as a traditional role of protector and provider. Male identity has been taken a new dimension in society after the men's movement. The men's movement emerged in the 1980's as a complementary counterpart to the feminist movement.

Male identity has always been defined by cultural considerations-notions of 'maleness' vis-à-vis femininity.

The term 'Masculinity' has been freely used with male identity. It is also defined as something traditionally considered being characteristic of a male. Masculinity is a characteristic related to traditional real men. Masculinity is one aspect of gender identity. In general, the characteristics associated with men are strength, ambition, command, stubbornness, aggression, etc. Connell argues that,

[m]asculinity" does not exist except in contrast with "femininity"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Connell, R.W. *Masculinities*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995 p. 68.

Connell posits that the sexes became identified with equivalent and differing characteristics. Under the societal structure, many definitions of masculinity arise regarding the relationship between gender and identity. For example, Craig's states that,

[m]asculinity is what a culture expects of its men<sup>2</sup>.

This definition suggests that masculinity essentially exists only in a cultural context as something rooted in the traditions, codes and expectations commonly held by a society. Definition of masculinity is a construct by society under the social norms.

There are a few common traits that essentially make up the masculine gender. Though roles vary slightly in each culture, there are certain characteristic features that appear in almost every male. Whatever the positive or negative manifestations of these may be, they are truly what make a man what he is. In all these approaches, we learn that how male identity develops and how similar themes emerge from the different approaches. These themes, describing characteristic features of male identity, include: 1) fear of femininity, 2) status and achievement 3) emotional inexpressiveness, 4) homophobia, 5) need for power and control, 6) obsession with success, 7) Aggression and 8) Adventure. These characteristic features are in general because every man has different features apart from these.

## Male Identity in *Remembering Babylon*

*Remembering Babylon* is a recognized novel published in 1993. In *Remembering Babylon*, the story essentially centers on Gemmy Fairley, a civilized boy who lives with the aboriginal people. This novel won major awards of Australia like International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 1996, Prix Baudelaire (France) in 1995, Los Angeles Times Book Prize and Best Novel in 1994. *Remembering Babylon* is a prime example of the novel dealing with the theme of male identity.

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, in settlement of Queensland, Australia the story of the novel takes place. Three children, Lachlan, Janet and Meg of the village playing a game at the edge of the area and their life are turned upside down by the appearance of a man. A remarkable figure stumbles out of the bush. He appears to be white, but acts like an Aboriginal. He was a ship's boy who was abandoned in the north of Australia. He was thirteen year old who spent sixteen years with the aboriginal tribe who found him. Name of that boy is Gemmy. He does not remember his language and culture. At the beginning, Gemmy creates a movement in the village. Although, the savage mentality people want to help him and the McIvor family takes him to live with them. This family includes the children, who found Gemmy, are a daughter of the McIvor Janet, and nephew, Lachlan Beattie. The McIvor family is from Scotland. They had come to the Australia for the purpose of a good lifestyle.

The European settlers are looking towards the blacks in a different point of view. They are divided into the two major groups. First group of settlers believes that blacks should be killed because they could not become the original Christians and they are savage. The second group is a warm hearted settler, who believes that black people could be tamed,

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<sup>2</sup>Craig, Steve. 'Considering Men and the Media', in Craig, Steve (ed.), *Men, Masculinity and the Media*. Sage, London, 1992: 3.

and a tamed person becomes their servants. Both groups are tries to win Gemmy's confidence for knowing information about the plans of black peoples. Gemmy knows everything but remains silent. Gemmy realizes that he can no longer stay in the village.

The McIvor family also realizes this thing, and they send Gemmy away from the settlement to live with Mrs. Hutchence. In some days, he goes from there in the wilderness. At the time of living, with Mrs. Hutchence Gemmy writes about what he thinks on the seven pieces of paper. The minister of the settlement, Mr. Frazer had written Gemmy's life story which based on that paper. At the end of the novel, Lachlan is the minister in the government. Janet has become a nun.

David Malouf is use of male identity can be seen in a variety of characters and their relationships with other characters. Lachlan and the relationship he has with Gemmy serve to show the power each holds over the other. Lachlan uses Gemmy as a means to take charge of Gemmy and brings him back to the village. In the village as a native boy, Lachlan dominates over Gemmy and tries to catch the attention of townspeople though he is a child. It shows that each boy always wants to become a real man. Lachlan's male identity reflects when he brings Gemmy in the village, at the time of playing a game and with the relationship of Gemmy. At the time of game playing, he forced to his female cousins to join in that shows his male dominance over the female. Janet and Lachlan's relationship are also based on the male female identity. Lachlan holds a stick over Gemmy as a gun is showed Lachlan's position of power. Lachlan has a highly influenced by his community and this show through his masculine traits. Though other people think that Gemmy has dumb, unintelligent and unmanly boy, he shows his masculine power later in the novel.

In the world, many communities follow patriarchal culture. In such communities men dominate the females. The power and control are central to men's self-identity. Real men have been power and control over others. If any man does not have the power and control, he is not treated better than a woman. Every man always tries to be in control over others. It is always seen in the patriarchal society that men always control their families. In the novel, males are dominating over the female, which is one of the characteristic features of the male identity; this can be seen in the relationship between Lachlan and Janet. From the very beginning Lachlan gets all the credit of bringing Gemmy while his cousins are ignored. Though Lachlan has been younger than Janet because of him is

male, he dominates over them. Malouf gives importance to male characters throughout the novel which is seen in the description of women characters when Malouf describes the settlement area, he describes women as follows:

...women in sunbonnets, and barefoot youth who, with nothing to do in the evening, came to sit with their feet up on the rails of the verandah and tell raw jokes, practice their spitting, and flick cigarette butts with a hiss into the trough(P5).

It shows that women cannot do any work without making jokes. The fact that, in the first chapter, the kids' game is represented the difference, between males and females in European society. The boy was leading the game with the two girls. This demonstrates that the children are being brought up in a society where males are dominant over females. Lachlan, the only male character out of the three, takes the lead and decides the game no matter the opinion presented by the girls and represents the patriarchal society.

At the beginning of the novel, Gemmy shows the childlike nature, unintelligent and unmanly character. Gemmy has a power of intelligence. He is smart and cool minded boy. Through these characteristic features, he slowly wins the hearts of all people and tries to uniting the blacks and whites. Gemmy does not show his power with an action or any masculine traits, but it shows through his intelligence. At early encounter, Lachlan and other children are shocking Gemmy's presence because of the unknown person. The language, which uses Gemmy, is totally new for Lachlan and townspeople. This is the advantage for Gemmy because it makes nerves Lachlan and townspeople, which is shown through these lines;

the idea of a language he did not know scared him(P3).

Lachlan is the main character in this novel, which shows the real masculine traits. He is influenced by the native peoples and thinks that power has provided the best life in the community. When they bring Gemmy in the village, he tries to attract peoples towards his power. He has good leading power which shown when he is leading the girls on a hunt. He is leading not only because of leading power but also power of gender as a boy. Lachlan's idea of power is explored through following lines,

He thought that if he allowed the man to go on using it, he would see how weak they were and get the advantage of them.  
(P3)

The man, who has a power, is respected in society. At the early age, Lachlan wants to obtain this power for control over Gemmy. Though Gemmy seem a dumb character, he is using Lachlan for gain power. Lachlan has shown his power in the starting of the novel through including two bore girls in a game.

All his gift for fantasy and his will too, which was stubborn  
(P1).

This line explores his desire for power as he stubborn. Stubborn means a control in a critical situation. When he uses a stick as a gun, he shows power. Lachlan's stance makes Gemmy helpless, and the power asserts Lachlan to take authority on Gemmy. This authority allows him to take prison Gemmy. As he returns to the village, he is neglected by the people because he is a kid. Though he is a kid, he shows his power in interaction with Gemmy. George Abbot is an important character in this novel. He does not want to a powerful man or leader. He wants to get the higher class. He tries to gain power for that ability through superiority. He wants to become a noble person to whom people give respect through social power. George Abbot is representative of a common Australian with a different power. He thinks that intellectual ability is a real power. This power lies in eyes of the beholder. George is reading French book shows his value of knowledge.

Malouf explores mankind's fear of the unknown through the settlers. The introductory passages are exploring the unknown creature. The description of the unknown creature "...was a scarecrow" (P3) does not belong to humanity. This dehumanizing process continues when they refer him "it" (P3). Though the natives are very strong, they frightened of unknown. When Gemmy brings at the settlement area by children all people gathered there for seeing the unknown figure. They are at once frighten and curious. As word spreads in the

settler town, they all come to view this “specimen” (P4). Here, Malouf shows us their curiosity, their fear, simply with the lines,

this specimen of – of what? What was he? (P4).

As Malouf explores male identity in this novel, he also wants to present the un-masculine traits of the village people through their fear of the unknown. The description of Gemmy gives unmanly by Malouf. Gemmy was in a critical situation when Lachlan holds the gun on Gemmy, who replies,

Do not shoot,’ ... ‘I am a B-b-british object! (P3).

That time Lachlan does not understand the language.

The idea of a language he did not know scared him (P3)

It shows that Lachlan was a little bit scared, but he think that if he allows to use this language to the man he would see how weak they were and get the advantage of them, so Lachlan moves the stick towards the man and says,

Stop that,’ he yelled. ‘Just steik yur mooth (P3).

Here, Malouf presents how Lachlan was disturbed and a little disgusted by Gemmy’s display of unmanliness. Aggression is the man’s major characteristic feature. In this novel’ Lachlan shows his aggression at the time of Gemmy’s interaction. George Abbot has also aggressive nature, which reflects through his power based relationship with children. He is a schoolmaster. He always thinks that he has been forced to move Australia. This miserable thing takes out his aggression on his pupils.

The beginning of the novels hints at themes the novel will explore later. After seeing unknown person, Lachlan is ready to protect his cousin, which is one of the masculine traits. He believes in the power of the weapon and takes a stick to show that he is a real man always ready to face challenges. David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon* utilizes the opening of the novel to present its view on major themes and illustrate major conflicts in the text. A discussion of male identity, the opening chapter also presents a man vs. society conflict between the settlers’ village and Gemmy, the half aboriginal, half British man who is at the centre of events.

As the head of the McIvor family, Jock is also having the qualities of protectiveness. At the settlement area, he faces very critical situation regarding Gemmy. After some time, Jock changes his behavior and feelings towards Gemmy. At first he feels disgust, but gradually finds himself defending Gemmy when his neighbors are worried. The turning point of Jock’s acceptance towards Gemmy comes when the neighbors have kidnapped Gemmy. They kidnapped Gemmy from his bed and taken him away from their hut to beat him up. Jock goes there after them to help Gemmy. This shows how Malouf presents the male characteristic feature, protectiveness through Jock that every elder man in the house always protects us in every situation. Though Jock little bit disgusts Gemmy, he protects him in a bad situation.

Every man has been eager to get success, and it gets through the new discoveries or the new dimension towards life. In society success is often related with the person's income as well as his/her prestige, fame, and power. So for getting a higher status, men are always related with the work and spending much of their lives working as well as planning for work. It gives them income as well as prestige, fame and power. Every man is obsessed with success, and this is one of the major important characteristic features of men. Mr. Frazer is the most aware character when it comes to the changes that occur, and are needed in this community. He wants that they have to rub their English eyes and look again towards country.

Men gain status by being successful in all they do. Men are successful when they use their physical power, intellectual power and ambition in work. If they are successful, they get achievement. In this novel, Gemmy realizes that Lachlan has achieved the status through true power with a following quote,

It was just a stick, but that did not mean it was harmless, what it stood for, and the boys fearful, but fearless stance was more important than a stick or a gun, and had an indelible impression on him. (P32)<sup>3</sup>

This stance and attitude shows power of him and it achieves the status in society. Though it was a stick, his stance is fearful. Moreover, Janet McIvor possesses a different power of Gemmy, in comparison to that of Lachlan,

His power lay in your recognizing that he possessed it. It was the power that he was a boy; because one day, the authority he had claimed in raising the stick to his shoulder would be real...The girl's power was entirely her own. She needed no witness to it. (P33)<sup>4</sup>

Also, it seems as though Gemmy, by his own choice, gives Ellen McIvor power over him,

...he had so little experience in his life of either the domestic or the feminine. It pleased him to find the things he could do to make her life easier, and all the more to see the shy, offhand way she had accepted him. (P33)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Malouf, David. *Remembering Babylon*. London: The Hogarth Press - Chatto & Windus, 1993; London: Vintage, 1994. "Remembering Babylon – Power & Discourse in Chapter 3.Mr..." *Remembering Babylon – Power & Discourse in Chapter 3* N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Malouf, David. *Remembering Babylon*. London: The Hogarth Press - Chatto & Windus, 1993; London: Vintage, 1994. "Remembering Babylon – Power & Discourse in Chapter 3.Mr..." *Remembering Babylon – Power & Discourse in Chapter 3* N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Malouf, David. *Remembering Babylon*. London: The Hogarth Press - Chatto & Windus, 1993; London: Vintage, 1994. "Remembering Babylon – Power & Discourse in Chapter 3.Mr..." *Remembering Babylon – Power & Discourse in Chapter 3* N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Feb. 2014.

However Gemmy, unlike on previous occasions, does not give or allow Jock McIvor to have any power or control over him whatsoever and as a direct result of this Jock becomes troubled, as Jock does not wish to get on the wrong side of his friends, in which the reader could assume some degree of power or control over Jock. However, Gemmy quickly realizes that; this could have a negative impact upon himself as well;

... he met in the settlement, where he was always under suspicion, and always, even when no one appeared to be watching, under silent scrutiny. (P34)

Throughout *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf uses symbols to communicate and enhance the theme of male identity of the text. Examples of this include the stone, the rain, Gemmy himself, the gun, etc. Rain are used to show how men wash the last remnants of their previous life in order to give them freedom. Stone represents the male power. Gemmy himself shows how one man can break cultural barriers and stereotypes. Gun represents power, western values, and western culture. Even a make-believe gun in the hands of a small boy has powerful implications. It also represents masculine values. Lachlan feels an obligation to defend instantly and uses a stick to create a symbol of western masculinity.

## Conclusion

Malouf's characters are psychologically intricate and lucid. In the opening chapter, it is Lachlan's character that captures attention. Malouf has a real insight of the male condition. It seems through as he portrays male characters with depth, but without going to great pains to do it. We are immediately aware of Lachlan's masculinity; his need to control, seek power and glory – all this in a twelve year old. Lachlan was "determined to keep hold of the bit of glory he had won." (P5)

Each character of Malouf represents different masculine traits with some weaknesses and strengths. Among all the characters, Lachlan Beattie has been real masculinity. He has been stereotypical men power. Male dominance is also shown in this novel, through the Lachlan and Janet.

The male condition, particularly how we react to new surroundings and place association unto places is discussed within this novel which is one of the characteristic features of the male identity. Gemmy and Lachlan come from another area, but they lives very strongly in the new world and make a new identity over there. Both are always ready to face new challenges. Each male character in this novel presents the masculine traits through his behavior.

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