

# The Construction of Homeland Identity in *Remembering Babylon*

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## Abstract

As a former British colony, the culture of the suzerain, Britain, has long occupied a dominant position in Australia, and this strong position of the suzerain's culture has brought a strong sense of "cultural inferiority" to Australians. This is mainly manifested in the distrust of Australians in their own culture, and they often reveal an "endless tendency to compare", which leads to a series of problems in the process of Australians building their homeland.

**Keywords:** race, *Remembering Babylon*, aboriginal Australians

## 1. Introduction

The novel *Remembering Babylon* by the famous Australian writer David Malouf mainly tells the story of Jimmy, a white British man who was raised by Aboriginal people, and returns to a white settlement as an adult. Set in the mid-19th century Scottish settlement in northern Queensland, the novel focuses on the changes brought about by Jimmy's entry into European settlements and their fear of the unknown. Why are European immigrants fearful and hostile to indigenous peoples? What effect did Jimmy's presence have on these immigrants? These questions lead us to think in the process of exploring the novel.

"The novel mainly tells the story of a white immigrant settling in Queensland, Australia, where a white child is playing in the bushes on the edge of the settlement and accidentally encounters a young man who behaves like an Aboriginal people, but whose skin and hair are the same color as theirs" (Kong Yilei, 2011). "This young man named Jimmy, a poor orphan who grew up in a London slum, came to Australia by chance on a merchant ship, but was abandoned on the beach by his companions due to illness, and he was found and taken in by the local locals" (Kong Yilei, 2011). The children bring the strange young man back to the white settlement where they live, and they focus on Jimmy's close association with the Aboriginal people, and the white settlers of the settlement have different attitudes towards him, "through the character of Jimmy, Indigenous influences are ubiquitous in the novel, a fact that cannot be ignored and avoided by the inhabitants of every settlement" (Kong Yilei, 2011).

## 2. White Criticism

As an emerging interdisciplinary field of research, "white critique" first began in the United States in the second half of the 20th century, and is sometimes referred to as "critical research on race and whiteness". As a perspective of literary criticism, "white criticism" was first derived from black American writing and race theory, and the more influential early works were Du Bois's *The Black Man's Soul* and Baldwin's *The Next Fire*. These works poignantly point out that "human beings have always had differences in skin color, but in recent history, white has become the standard color, and black has become a lowly and abnormal mark" (Wang Labao, 2021). White critique has brought about a fundamental shift in the focus of research from non-white ethnic groups to white communities and their privileges. "The aim of the white critique is to deconstruct the racial hegemony constructed by white people based on the division of skin color, so that white no longer becomes synonymous with universal humanity, so as to dissolve the essential understanding of specific groups and individuals formed

by ethnic background, and finally realize the equality of non-whites and whites in political, economic, and cultural aspects” (Wang Lixia, 2015).

“Australian historian David Day points out that for a colonizer to truly take possession of a newly opened colony, he must first claim the land in the name of the king or the colonial authority” (Kong Yilei, 2011). In fact, before the white people set foot on the Australian continent, the aborigines had lived on the land for at least 40,000 years, and they were the real masters of the continent. In order for the colonists to claim possession of the land and establish a colony there, they had to face the difficult problem of how to deal with the relationship with the indigenous population. These aborigines are very different from white Europeans in terms of lifestyle, culture, appearance, etc., and their attitudes are directly related to whether the colonizers can successfully establish colonies in the region, and whether white immigrants can use it as their place of life.

“Therefore, for white people living in Australia, Aboriginal people are an inevitable reality in the construction of their homeland identity” (Kong Yilei, 2011). In the 19th century, white Australian writers portrayed Aborigines as inferior, and in this context, the novel’s protagonist, Jimmy, a white youth who had lived among Aborigines for many years, suddenly appeared in a white immigrant settlement, immediately causing suspicion, disgust, fear, hatred, and even premeditated murder. Soon, white settlers began to speculate about Jimmy’s relationship with the Aborigines and were shocked by Jimmy’s contamination with the Aborigines: “He lived with them for half his life, and he seemed to be happy. Regardless of what white immigrants think of these abominations”, the reader understands that Jimmy has actually been living a simple and innocent life with Indigenous blacks. To emphasize Jimmy’s innocence, Malouf tells readers that “no woman has anything to do with him” because Jimmy is seen by the locals as “someone who walks between whites and natives”.

For Allen, the new world is nothing more than an empty land, and Jimmy doesn’t see it that way. He was the adopted son of the Aboriginal people, who lived among the Aborigines since he was a child and spent most of his teenage years on the Australian continent, a period of development and an important stage in the formation of one’s thoughts and emotions. When he first came to the White Settlers, he was completely reborn as a true native. It is not surprising, then, that in Jimmy’s eyes, the New World is “full of life and brilliance”, a magical land filled with “creatures of all kinds, with their own names and stories, and their souls” (Malouf : 117). In Jimmy’s eyes, the Australian continent is his Jerusalem. Jimmy’s understanding of the Australian continent is entirely representative of the Aboriginal perspective. They sought to establish their New Jerusalem on the distant Australian continent, convinced that they had “good reason to erase every trace of local character from Australian soil, so that the land would finally feel at home” (Malouf : 9). In the novel, the governor of Brisbane is busy building monuments and naming places in the nascent city, seeing himself as the creator of the empire.

### 3. Genocide

With regard to racism, “according to the French thinker Pierre-André Taguieff, racism manifests itself as a product of secularization, a product of modern thought in non-religious science” (Kong Yilei, 2011). According to the following criteria, human beings should be treated differently because they naturally belong to a race of unequal values (“evolution” to varying degrees), with different values. Colonization, on the other hand, is “an act and a historical process based on ideas of racial superiority and inferiority, based on military force, control and acquisition of resources outside one’s own borders”. “Racism is closely related to colonialism, and almost all colonial activities and ideas are based on the ‘theory of racial superiority and inferiority’ advocated by racism” (Kong Yilei, 2011). “As early as the ancient Greek period, a distinctly civilized/barbaric opposition to the interethnic view of politics was formed, on the basis of which a group of prominent scholars and thinkers developed a discourse on colonialism. Plato called all non-Greeks barbarians, and he openly stated that they hated barbarians from the bottom of their hearts and considered the colonization of foreign races to be justified” (Kong Yilei, 2011).

Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that the human world was made up of infinite processes of superiority and inferiority, and that slavery could be justified by the existence of an inherently inferior race. In the mid-to-late 18th century, with the Industrial Revolution, Western colonialism continued to expand around the world, and they pursued the racial concept with white supremacy as the core, believing that according to the laws of natural survival, the establishment of colonies was a necessary condition for the prosperity and survival of excellent races and powerful countries, and those inferior races and inferior nations could only progress under the protection and education of whites, and violence was an important means of racism.

“The conquest and domination of different peoples was achieved through violence. Whether it was the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire or the British colonization of North America and Australia, violence was ‘an important means of establishing colonial rule, asserting white power, and enforcing racial oppression, exploitation, and enslavement’” (Hao Shiyuan, 2002). White residents constantly perceive the potential threat posed by the evil natives and feel that they are lurking around, waiting for an opportunity to attack. But the most frustrating thing is knowing that just three years ago, the land you were in was still another unknown, and this

feeling of something else, made white immigrants feel like they were on the other side of the world, in a distant and inhospitable way. In the novel, the McElvers feel that the moon has been misplaced. At the same time, migrants are concerned about being polluted by their surroundings and believe that their place has not yet had a full impact on them.

#### 4. The Right Path for the Construction of White Homeland Identity

In the eighties of the last century, the French sociologist Bourdieu put forward the concept of “literary field”, he believed that “the status of individuals and other institutions that play a role in the literary field depends on the accumulation of capital”, and this “capital” is not only money, but more importantly, “intangible capital”, that is, aesthetic values and popularity.

In an interview, Malouf unmistakably told readers that ‘Australianness’ was an important theme he sought out in his work, and he openly declared that he believed that this ‘Australianness’ was exactly what they were trying to represent. When he looks back at most of his work, he says to himself that what he writes is all about what it means to be an Australian. How Australians construct their homes is one of the main manifestations of this “Australianness” in Maroff’s writing. The search for and construction of homeland is a common theme in twentieth-century postcolonial literature.

Homi Baba argues that “trans-regional and cultural confines the illusion of non-family, which leads to a lack of belonging” (Tong Ming, 2005). Bill Ashcroft and others, in their book *Reverse Writing of Empire*, also point out that “immigration has led to a postcolonial crisis of distinct identity; People are beginning to focus on how to establish or restore an effective identity relationship between the self and the land” (Ashcroft, 2002, quoted in Kong Yilei, 2011). Australia is a typical migrant society, and “migration” has led to cross-regional and cross-cultural migration, leaving Australians in a dilemma about home and belonging, prompting Malouf to explore the dilemma of “home”.

Looking at the path of fiction writing for more than 40 years and the evaluation of his work by scholars, Malouf’s discussion of the theme of the construction of Australian homeland identity can be divided into four dimensions: race, nature, culture and self-definition. “Australian historian David Day points out that in order for a colonist to truly own a newly opened colony, he must first claim the land in the name of the king or the colonial authority” (Kong Yilei, 2011). “It is well known that Aboriginal people have lived on the Australian continent for at least 40,000 years before they set foot on the continent, and they are the real masters of the continent” (Kong Yilei, 2011). In order for the colonists to claim the land and establish a colony there, they had to face the difficult problem of how to deal with the indigenous population. These aborigines were very different from white Europeans in terms of lifestyle, culture, and appearance, and their attitudes were directly related to whether the colonizers would succeed in establishing colonies in the region, and whether the white settlers would be able to use the place as their place of life. Thus, for white people living in Australia, Aboriginal people are an inevitable reality in the construction of their homeland identity.

Malouf’s novel *Remembering Babylon* explores how white colonists treated Aboriginal people in order to take possession of the land and make Australia their “homeland” in the early days of the colony. Through his description, “he reflects two different patterns of white people’s treatment of racial differences: the first is the violent model” (Kong Yilei, 2011), in order to occupy Australian land and make it a “pure white” homeland, some white colonists tried to use direct violence to exterminate the aboriginal people who originally lived on this land; “The other part of the colonizers, who appear to be mild, actually use structural violence in a futile attempt to take indigenous peoples for themselves and turn them into tools for their own exploitation” (Kong Yilei, 2011). “Newspapers, as public media, conspired with colonizers to use cultural violence in the face of violence such as the brutal killing of indigenous peoples by white herders and police” (Kong Yilei, 2011). In stark contrast to the violent model is the “take responsibility for him” model, in which whites see the indigenous as the absolute other, a real reality, and respond with love and tolerance to form a pure, intimate relationship with each other. Through this novel, Malouf reminds people that through violence against the natives, Australians will never find their Jerusalem, a land that will become the eternal penal colony of Babylon. Only by drawing nourishment from the indigenous culture and establishing an intimate and harmonious relationship with the land, as Jimmy did, can this land become a true home and find its own Jerusalem.

#### 5. Conclusion

The coexistence of people, as well as the innate kindness and love of human beings, mutual tolerance and understanding, especially the efforts of the white side, is the real hope for resolving the sharp contradictions and mutual grievances between white Australian immigrants and Aborigines for two hundred years. Babylon should be remembered after self-reflection, which will ultimately allow Australia to have a harmonious and beautiful future.

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