

REMEMBERING BABYLON – AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: This paper explores the main problems which globalization poses to the modern society –the degrading of the human link to nature. In order to exemplify it I will focus on Remembering Babylon, by David Malouf, because it shows the difference between ancestral beliefs and the values of the modern society. Through the analysis attention will be drawn to the role played by the Ecocriticism to show the negative impact of globalization on the land, moral values and environment in general. Through their works, the ecocritics have attempted to reveal the real meaning of nature and life. Gemmy Fairley, the main character from Remembering Babylon, is the representation of the human being living in between two cultures that are incompatible, so he is forced to make a decision.

Keywords: Globalization, ecocriticism, culture, environment, Remembering Babylon.

According to Ursula K. Heise, globalization has lately replaced important concepts such as “postmodernism” and “postcolonialism” (Heise: 4). Globalization is a relatively recent phenomenon that marks the difference between the present and what was happening 50 years ago or more.

A few decades ago, it was still possible to go and visit places that were very different from the place we were from. The architecture, landscape, language, clothes and moral values that guided the way of life of that people were all different from what we were used to. Those were the years when there was a visible cultural diversity. This diversity still prevails today. Globalization is a term with a number of meanings. It means the development of global financial markets and transnational companies, and it also means the growth of national economy. But the purpose of this paper is not to analyze the impact of globalization on economy, but on people, culture and the environment through the lens of ecocriticism.

One of the main disadvantages of globalization is the loss of tradition and homogenization of cultures as well and the huge impact it has on the environment. This loss and the impact it has on the environment have become the axes of ecocriticism, also known as ecological criticism or “green” criticism. The purpose of this field of literary study is, as it is explained in the Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, to see the way in which the natural world is depicted in literary works in an era of globalization. More often than not, these literary works present the bond and relation between man and nature and the role nature plays in the human life: “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glottfelty: xviii).

One of the contemporary literary works portraying this new trend is *Remembering Babylon* by David Malouf, through a story of the acculturation of a white man adopted by the aborigines. Nowadays, our environment goes through tremendous changes due to the emergence of globalization. The huge growth of industrialization has had a negative effect on

nature, causing air pollution, deforestation, climate change and societal changes, which have become major themes of the twenty-first century literature (Heige: 205).

Ecological criticism refers to ecological awareness and requires interdisciplinarity. In his study *Debating Ecocriticism*, Glen A. Love argues that:

Literature involves interrelationships to encompass nonhuman as well as human contexts. Ecological thinking about literature requires us to take the nonhuman world as seriously as previous modes of criticism have taken the realm of society and culture. That would seem to be ecocriticism's greatest challenge and its greatest opportunity. (Love: 48)

In other words, in order to understand nature, it is fundamental to learn how it works from a scientific and ethical point of view. Thus, ecocriticism supports the idea that by studying the representation of our environment in literature, we can learn a great deal about nature. But simply studying it is not enough. One must act in order to get results. Apart from this, ecocriticism refers to nature and our relation to it. It also refers indirectly to globalization, because this phenomenon is slowly destroying the bond between human and nature.

In this article, I am focusing on the work of David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*, a novel in which the author underlines the importance of nature and of the community. It is the story of a white boy that gets lost in a foreign land and it is adopted by aborigines. After a few years, he re-enters the civilized world, a world that looks at him with superiority and contempt:

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 either one face or the other; as if he were always standing there at one of those meetings, but in his case willingly and the encounter was an embrace. (Malouf: 43)

This is not the character's first contact to the civilized world. However, the two worlds he has been living in are so different, that he decides to choose the one closer to his heart – the world that lives in close connection to nature, the world he has learned to love since he fell from a ship 16 years earlier.

The story is set in Queensland, Australia. Gemmy is found hiding behind a bush by some children who were playing nearby. He is poorly dressed, dirty and seems to be a savage. He looks like a bird:

The stick-like legs, all knobbed at the joints, suggested a wounded water-bird, a brolga, or a human that in the manner of the tales they told one another, all spells and curses, had been changed into a bird, but only halfway, and now, neither one thing nor the other [...] It was a scarecrow that had somehow caught the spark of life, got down from its pole [...] (Malouf: 2)

However, he is a white sailor that has been living with an aboriginal tribe for the past 16 years. It is difficult for him to speak English, even though it is his mother tongue. Moreover, he has embraced the lifestyle and culture of his adopted tribe. But he is between cultures. He does not belong entirely to a culture, but to both.

There are two types of groups that have different, yet similar points of view. Some of them want to commit a pogrom – they believe the blacks should be all killed. The others think the black people could be "tamed" and become their servants, just like in the south of the United States. That is to say that they envisage a change in their culture for their own benefit.

Both groups try to win Gemmy's confidence, but they do not succeed, although Gemmy respects everyone. The whites however suspect him of being in contact with the blacks, so when an aborigine is seen with him, Gemmy is assaulted by the settlers and even injured. Soon after that, he disappears into the wilderness.

It is worth noting that since immemorial times, the human being had been living in nature. The natural environment gave him food, shelter and clothes. Now, all the human necessities are produced at an industrial scale in places where, sometime in the past, there was a forest, or a river. We have reached a time of crisis for our environment, a time when "we face a global catastrophe" (Love: x), a catastrophe that reaches our environment, but also our human nature. People need to do something. The inaction towards the environmental problem that characterizes the modern era needs to stop.

Globalization is a complex process taking place at the international level by redefining the structure of the world. As a consequence, the last few decades that are characterized by globalization left their mark on our environment, by causing it to degrade. Climate change is one of the unwanted effects and it is on the verge of becoming a serious problem of the human kind. Other consequences are: shrinking of the ozone layer, greenhouse effect, draughts, acid rains, etc. These have led to the extinction of animal species that are important to the ecosystem.

Moreover, the environment is not the only one that faces degradation. The relation man-nature-culture also suffers changes due to the modernization of our habits. However, our cultural identity lies in our relation to the environment. There are a lot of people that are one hundred percent dependent on what nature is giving them. By destroying the environment, we destroy their right to live.

Globalization also tries to create a certain homogenization between people; thus, the modern society does no longer focus on the continuity of a people, but on standardization with other cultures. We are witnessing the loss of cultural diversity, the disappearance of regional languages and national customs. In 1962, Marshall McLuhan predicted that the world was going to become a "global village" (McLuhan: 42).

From another point of view, globalization can also be defined as the impact of the global culture on the local culture. This convergence is often seen as being negative:

Many societies, particularly indigenous peoples, view culture as their richest heritage, without which they have no roots, history or soul. Its value is other than monetary. To commodify it is to destroy it. (Barlow: 2)

Often, cultural homogenization or, as Barlow puts it, *commoditization*, is seen as “Americanization” because America, and particularly the United States, influence the world (Appadurai: 32). This statement is true. Mass-media is the main means by which the American influence enters our homes. The American influence can be observed in the way people dress, in the life style they adopt, in the type of food they eat. All these are everyday aspects that contribute to the change of our culture.

Culture – globalization – nature – these are three terms that should coexist, work together and complete one another. However, sometimes they do not correspond to their respective meaning. That is, culture can coexist with nature, but it will definitely change it. Nature can also influence culture. Globalization is the most powerful of them because it has the power to destroy the other ones.

One of the examples we can use to describe this link may be found in the novel *Remembering Babylon*, written in 1993 by David Malouf, – the story of a young boy who lived most of his life with the aborigines and who returns to civilization. In the novel, Gemmy is morally closer to his adopted people or the adopted culture. He is by nature a white man, but by nurture an aborigine. Thus, the civilized culture does not exercise any influence on, or attraction to him. The bond with nature is stronger and cannot be destroyed. Thus, we can see the difference between the mentalities: the settler’s who is part of a superior culture, and the white aborigine’s, who had the opportunity to meet, compare and contrast both cultures.

But what is culture exactly?

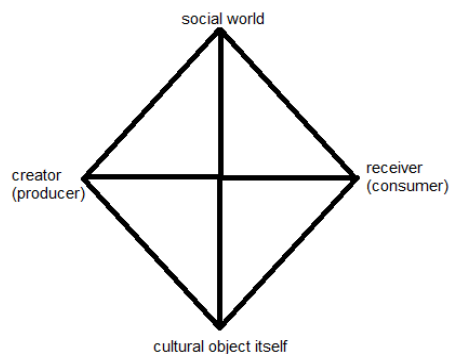
There have been many attempts to define this concept. One of the most complete definitions is the one provided by Philip Smith and Alexander Riley in *Cultural theory: An Introduction*. According to them, culture is a real “way of life”. It does not mean commodities or technology, but it is seen as the total amount of values, beliefs, symbols and signs which a group of people has in common. It is also strongly linked to practices and different activities of its members (Smith, Riley: 1).

The globalization of culture means, on the one hand, the globalization of cultural identity, its homogenization with the other cultures. On the other hand, this process of globalization also allows better intercultural communication and helps cultures to develop. However, this creates a paradoxical dichotomy between globalization and cultural diversity.

First of all, there is the possibility to give more power to the people, to help them be independent and give them the opportunity to seek better lives elsewhere. Moreover, globalization also means better lives in general, due to increased contact and openness towards other nations. Technology is advancing with the speed of the light and now all

cultures have access to it. But this is exactly what causes this dichotomy. Globalization enables a certain process of colonization, the creation of an identical mass-culture that does not benefit the cultural identity. Technology destroys the natural environment. It is true that there are technologies that benefit cultures, but those were built with the cost of damaging the environment.

This dichotomy can be explained by Wendy Griswold's cultural diamond:



(Griswold: 15)

The concept of cultural diamond refers to the link between the social world and the cultural object. It is referring to the fact that, in order to understand the cultural object, one must understand all the four points (social world, receiver, cultural object, creator) and the links between them.

In addition to this, the Wilderness Act of 1964 is a good example of how the division between society and nature is institutionalized in the western societies. The first sentence of the act stipulates that the natural areas should be protected by the industrialized world. The Act recognized the prevailing realm of human activity that is industrialization and decided to give a certain territory to nature. Moreover, the act gave a definition to the term "wilderness" as opposed to "those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape." (Section 1-c). In other words, the creation of this policy can be seen as a symbol of contemporary society split from nature because it makes the difference between those two realms legally and geographically.

In Gemmy's story, this split is represented by the fence near the swamp, the border between the civilized society and the aborigines. This great divide between nature and society has been substantial to the Western thought and a modality through which people have come to see reality. Besides the rich literature on this topic, many aspects of the Western style of life have been moulded in conformity to this dichotomy. Moreover, when it comes to make a distinction between culture and nature, one must also take into account the culture - nurture binary opposition. In Gemmy's case, nurture won. However, he tried to become a white man again. He tried to re-assimilate the culture of the settlers, but instead, he is perceived as a "parody of the white man":

They felt an urge, when he went into one of his jerking and stammering fits, to look hard at the horizon, and when that yielded not satisfaction, to give grave attention to the dust between their boots. He was a parody of a white man. If you gave him a word for a thing, he could after a good deal of huffing and blowing, repeat it, but the next time round you had to teach him it to him all over again. He was imitation gone wrong, and the mere sight of it put you wrong too, made the whole business somehow foolish and open to doubt. (Malouf: 35)

Human beings acquire their culture through learning; thereby, people living in different places or different circumstances may develop different cultures.

Starting with the Industrial Revolution, which can be seen as the beginning of globalization, people from Western Europe became more and more disconnected and distant from their natural environments. This progress linked with industrialization and urbanization has led to their departure to other countries, in particular to the English colonies, thus influencing the local culture. However, there are some aspects of life that cannot be changed. These aspects are inoculated in the human's brain and heart by nurture. This is the social environment protecting and moulding the child from birth to the moment it becomes independent.

In the novel under scrutiny in this article, it is clear that nurture became more powerful than nature, because, even though white by nature, Gemmy was black by nurture. He was not accepted by the civilized settlers, so, in the end, this "B-b-british object" decides to go back to his adopted tribe. He has two cultural identities and he is trapped between two apparently incompatible worlds.

When it comes to defining the notion of cultural identity, there are different opinions. The world is nowadays subject to cultural difference; thus homogenization may lead to ruining cultural identity. In other words, we try to preserve our cultural identity, but modernization is so strong, that we cannot resist it. However, Gemmy never loses his identity. On the contrary, he manages to assimilate two identities that are very different. In spite of all this, Gemmy is aware that two identities cannot coexist. So he chooses to destroy the only connection he has with his past: the seven pages written by Mr. Abbot in which events from his unhappy childhood are recorded:

He felt, as he followed the white ribbon that led to the settlement, that he had lost all weight in the world; his feet made so little impression in the dust that it was as if he had not passed [...] He was going to claim back 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 [...] They were drawing him to his death. (Malouf: 160)

The fact that the papers are actually written by a schoolboy proves Gemmy's illiteracy and the ruling of the colonizer over the colonized. Gemmy represents the ancestral culture in Australia. He is partially Aborigine, partially white. But his heart tells him that living with the aborigines suits him best, so he goes back to being an aborigine. These last connections with his past and the fact that he wants them destroyed symbolize the fact that

he is embarrassed by what he is by nature and tries to reject his origins. In order to understand Gemmy, the reader must also analyze his behavior. He rejects the civilized world that is not his.

The impact of globalization on cultural identity is generally seen in a pessimistic light. It is associated with the destruction of culture and cultural identity as well as with the homogenization of cultures. Moreover, ecocriticism supports the idea of the destruction of nature and the bond between human and nature as a consequence of our modern technological world. In *Remembering Babylon*, the settlers are no longer in connection with nature. They consider themselves more civilized than the aborigines who live in close connection to it.

In conclusion, Gemmy's life reflects the impact of the modernization of the world on the environment and the relation between the human and nature which is degrading at an alarming pace. Globalization is a relatively recent concept. However, its effects are visible everywhere. The human-nature bond is no longer as powerful as in the past. Because of globalization, it seems that not only our environment, but also cultural identities are in great danger. *Remembering Babylon* manages to raise awareness of the perishing human-nature bond and the perilous growth of civilization.

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