

Treading the Line between Settler and Colonizer: Reading the Complexities in David Malouf's *A Foot in the Stream*

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Abstract: Although Australia has a colonial background, the Australian experience of colonialism as a settler colony, is not the same as that of India, a non-settler state. Issues of race complicate experiences. David Malouf, an Australian writer, is appreciative of the myriad culture and plurality of India; he is conscious of India's colonial past, yet his identity as white European is responsible for ingrained prejudicial assumptions.

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For critics, the major issue with the theory of Postcolonialism is that, it often has a tendency of levelling and disregarding the widely different experiences of colonialism of different countries worldwide. The theory frequently fails to take into account the importance of different factors like race and locatedness in the experience of colonialism and the subsequent crisis of identity and regeneration of the same. In this context, it is useful to consider Ella Shohat's significant essay 'Notes on the Postcolonial'. She writes, "*Positioning Australia and India, for example, in relation to an imperial center, simply because they were both colonies, equates the relations of the colonised white-settlers to the Europeans at the 'center' with that of the colonised indigenous populations to the Europeans. It also assumes that the white settler countries and the emerging Third World nations broke away from the 'center' in the same way.... The critical differences between the Europe's genocidal oppression of Aborigines in Australia, indigenous peoples of the Americas and Afro-Diasporic communities, and Europe's domination of European elites in the colonies are levelled with an easy stroke of the 'post'*".¹ Shohat, here, highlights the importance of the difference between different types of colonies and the resultant difference in the colonial experience. Discourses regarding the superiority or inferiority of a particular race contribute towards the overall experience.

The origin of countries like the U.S.A., Australia, and New Zealand was undoubtedly as colonies. However, their struggle for independence was nothing like that of the people of India and Africa. Their identity as White Europeans has simplified their crisis to a great extent. As an Australian writer bearing a colonial legacy, Malouf displays certain sensitivity towards Indians in his short story *A Foot in the Stream*. Yet, his identity as a white European bars him from instinctively gauging the complications and nuances of Indian history and identity. My objective in this paper is to show how Malouf's entity as Settler is at odds with his identity as white Occident, in this account of his encounter with India. I wish to highlight how subject and identity formation in settler states are different from societies that have faced the violence of colonial domination. Issues of race play a vital part in concerns of the gaze and understanding of the world.

It is evident from Malouf's words that he is aware of the politics of colonial architecture and that different features can be subtly exploited to signify the superiority and glory of the colonizer. He writes, "*Lutyens's design for New Delhi is grandly impressive, but the monumental layout...makes shameless use of the rhetoric of space to proclaim a distant and unapproachable authority. Very appropriate no doubt to the Raj, but odd in a democratic republic. (The same is true for Washington, whose prototype...is imperial rather than republican Rome.)*"² His words also prove that he is aware of India's status as a once colonized nation. He seems to have a notion of the 'real' India. He is convinced that '*the regulation twelve feet of clipped green lawn*'³ of the Imperial Hotel garden is not real India. He writes "*Tourists are stepping back a moment to enjoy space and tranquillity, a time out of the real India.*"⁴ For him, real India is about chaos, disorder and mystery. Hence,

although Malouf is consciously appreciative of India and Indians, as I shall try to show, his racial identity as White European is responsible for his ingrained prejudices of which he seems unaware.

Malouf is intrigued by India. The Settler in him relishes the plurality and overwhelming variety as something unique. He recognizes the power India holds over the Western mind by refusing to be scrutinized: *"The fear of India. It comes in many forms....fear of a phenomenon so dense and plural that it might, in its teeming inclusiveness, swamp the soul and destroy our certainty that the world is there to be read but is also readable."*⁵ Malouf is aware of the complex, fluid identity of Indians. He acknowledges the failure of stereotypes and is conscious of the agency of the Indians, even in their smallest trysts with Whites. The instance in which he is waylaid by children demanding 'baksheesh' teaches him about his own powerlessness and the myriad personality of Indians. Malouf's expectations are subverted and reversed so that he is forced to contemplate the intricacies and densities of the apparently chaotic and disorderly Indian society and identities. He writes, *"I was waylaid just before the entrance by a mob of children.... Baksheesh, baksheesh, they wailed, a dozen small hands tugging. I put my hand in my pocket, and in fumbling with the last of my Indian change dropped a shower of small coins on the pavement. They were immediately swept up. But the child who dived under my feet to retrieve them...did not scurry off as I expected. He reappeared, holding the coins out to me on a grubby palm, and I saw that the little scene we were involved in had not been resolved by my clumsiness, merely suspended. We still had our roles to play out. There were dignities. This wasn't a grab-as-grab-can situation as I had thought. It had structure, a social shape that was in every sense to be observed.*

*I took back my coins, the children resumed their wailing; but I was hooked."*⁶

Malouf had expected all these poor little children to want nothing but baksheesh. He had not imagined them to have distinct, individual personalities and value systems. He is taken aback to find a seven year old poor child who did not want his money, yet went into pains to retrieve it for him. He appreciates the fluid identity of the Indians and respects their rejection of stereotypes assigned to them.

Malouf's such experiences in India validate the importance of Homi Bhabha's theory of ambivalence. Writing about Bhabha's theory, John McLeod writes: *"Like Said, Bhabha argues that colonialism is informed by a series of assumptions which aim to legitimate its view of other lands and peoples."*⁷ As Bhabha has pointed out in his *Location of Culture*, colonial discourse works with the aim of creating the colonized people as a horde of degenerate people on the grounds of racial origin, so that colonial rule and administration may be justified. This is the reason behind the emergence of racial stereotypes that represent colonized peoples in derogatory, dehumanized ways. Bhabha points out that this objective of the colonial master is never completely fulfilled. He argues that the colonized subject is always in motion, ambivalently moving between similarity and difference in relation to the colonizer, so that the colonizer is threatened and tries to arrest him in stereotypes, a move that always fails. Malouf is all praise for the self-sufficient way in which Indian economy runs. He writes how even the poorest of the poor possesses resilience, and constantly reinvents himself and taps his potential. Inscribing these people as lazy, uncivilized and stupid does not seem to work for him. He feels that each Indian, even a beggar, has something to offer and is a small scale entrepreneur in his own right. He talks of the dirty, ragged shoe-polish boy who is himself shoeless and has set himself up with just a brush and some cream as his capital. He is very persistent and will not be evaded easily: *"I can believe he is one of the many here who live and sleep in the streets. But he has such energy, such tenacity and resourcefulness, that I can also imagine him surviving as the dusty little sparrows do. He seems indestructible."*⁸ Malouf marvels at the sheer will power to live; he wonders how, often without even the basic necessities of life, these common people possess such energy, hope and will power. He posits this tenacity and resourcefulness as something enviable, as something to aspire to. In this same vein he talks of the 'magician' who works only with a coin, and the few beggars who also have something or the other to offer in return for money: fortune-telling, singing or even wailing. For Malouf, these are *'small-scale entrepreneurs of their own skill'* and he is awed by their *'readiness to serve'*.

Everywhere in India, Malouf is conscious of the agency of the natives, and realizes that in most situations, the White man is not in control. The complexity of his encounters with Indians is brought out by his narration of his experience at Fatehpur Sikri, where a very old man comes up to him, points to the top of the Viceroy Gate that is 146 feet high and says, *"If the sahib gives 100 rupees ...I will jump from the top and the sahib can take a nice photograph."*⁹ When Malouf says that he does not have a camera he grins and says *"Well sahib, give me two rupees then because I am such a very old man."*¹⁰ Malouf gives him the money, not as much for sympathy as for something else. He says: *"He delivers this as if it were the punchline of a joke, and I laugh and give him the two rupees, but feel the joke would still work if I did not. Only then it would be his turn to laugh and walk away."*¹¹ Malouf feels that he had to give the money to keep up his appearance as a sahib in front of the old man. He felt obligated to play out the role that the discursive identity position of a White man in the East demanded. It is apparent from these details in the story that Malouf is a sensitive, discerning individual, and keeps a certain openness of mind in his interactions with Indians and his observation of them.

Yet, throughout the story it is obvious that Malouf harbours certain latent notions about India and Indians, which surface at various points of his narration. In this context it is important to discuss the title, 'A

Foot in the Stream'. It is apparent from the story, for he has mentioned it several times, that by 'stream' he means the endless flow of people, animals, carts, bicycles that he sees in India. He is overwhelmed by all that is happening around him. He tries to take in everything together, but fails, dazed by the sheer plenitude of everything. For him, the individuals that he sees are not humanized or individualized; they are part of an interminable stream, in which he has just put in his foot, thus signifying that he has not partaken in the entirety of Indian life. He does not let the whole of himself be immersed in the Third World country that is India. The title itself sets him apart as a White outsider.

On his way to Agra from Delhi very early on a cold winter morning, Malouf sees a stream of pedestrians moving in both directions. The stream does not seem to lessen as he moves forward and is constituted by people of all gender and ages. Malouf seems to be all praise for these walkers: "...all moving at the same easy pace, in the stately, straight-backed style that makes walking look so good, so natural. There are no slouchers or shufflers here. They walk with purpose, and it is this that makes these crowds so odd to the Western eye."¹² He praises the purposeful posture of these pedestrians, and the style of narration gradually carries the reader towards a positive climax, only to deflate expectations: "Where have they come from? Where are they going? They suggest some important rendezvous up ahead, a circus performance it might be, or a cricket match or political rally; just ahead or just behind. (But if it was behind we missed it, and if ahead we never arrive there.)...the throng swells round a flimsy settlement where food is being sold and passers-by can rest on benches or curl up on bare cots; but the stream never thins out. It might go on like this right across the country. The whole of India seems to be on the move between its borders, endlessly tramping, even when we are far out in the countryside."¹³ The description of the walk seems to indicate some serious business on the part of the people. However, it seems that for Malouf, the idea of an ordinary Indian's important rendezvous is limited to a cricket match, a circus or a political rally. Ironically, even these seem not to be in the agenda of the people, for Malouf has not seen such arrangements on his entire way to Agra. Instead, he sees these people either flocking up in front of cheap eateries or settling down to sleep in cots. The sense evoked is that of mindless, purposeless walking, emphasised by the writer's impression that the whole of India is moving between its borders, aimlessly. This account of walking calls up Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, where Said explores how the Orient is described as foolish, lazy, pleasure-loving in colonial discourse so that the Occident Self can emerge in contrast.

This brings us to Malouf's take on India's history and development in this story. One of the most important stereotypes of the Orient, according to Said is that the Orient is timeless. Speaking of this stereotype, John McLeod says, "If the West was considered the place of historical progress and scientific development, then the Orient was deemed remote from the influence of historical change.... It was considered to be essentially no different in the twelfth century than it was in the eighteenth, trapped in antiquity far behind the modern developments of the 'Enlightened' West. Conceived in this way, the Orient was often considered 'primitive' or 'backwards'. A Westerner travelling to Oriental lands was not just moving in space from one location to the other; potentially they were also travelling back in time to an earlier world. Hence in Orientalism, the Orient exists as a timeless place, changeless and static, cut off from the progress of Western history."¹⁴ Malouf here describes India as 'immemorial, endless, indestructible'. He says "Things have been like this forever, and will go on like this, in defiance of every catastrophe, into a future too remote to contemplate.... If this life is closer to primitive beginnings, it is also further off from the distant, the inconceivable end."¹⁵ For the narrator, India is outside the history of progress and development, even after gaining formal independence. Indian life is primitive. His involvement with India is superficial: he does not regard the history of the complex anti-colonial struggle and the resultant negotiations and identity transformations that is a reality of every Indian's life.

Malouf feels that Indian history is different. He says, "It is difficult to explain the sense of freedom I feel at being for a moment outside history as we conceive it."¹⁶ The 'we' refers to White Europeans, including Settlers. Unknowingly and unintentionally, India is Othered, and Indian history is assigned a subordinate position from the Eurocentric perspective. To illustrate how India is outside official history, Malouf uses the example of the swastika. The swastika, which evokes complex psychological emotions of shame, despair and collective guilt for Whites on account of its association with the Nazis, is used freely, as Malouf discovers, in India. He feels this is because Indian history is untouched by the knowledge and impact of concentration camps like Auschwitz. Malouf probably forgets that although Indians may not have been directly related to the atrocities of the Second World War, they have endured a two hundred year old history of violent colonialism, which has impacted them in complex ways. He does not regard that the word 'swastika' has its origin in Sanskrit, the Indian classical language. The symbol is being used in India since prehistoric times. Therefore, it's continued use even after the Second World War with élan, does not so much signify an innocence or ignorance as a desire to hold on to one's cultural signifiers. It may be construed as the success of Indian resistance strategies against colonial political and cultural domination.

In all fairness it must be acknowledged that Malouf's identity as an Australian settler has made him sensitive to the subtle politics of history and identity. He approaches India with an open mind and often turns the

onus of guilt and responsibility upon the Whites. He appreciates Indian simplicity and difference with a frankness that is honest. In concluding his story, he talks about the relativity of history, and seems to suggest that this very quality is redemptive: it allows the human soul a chance at salvation, even if for a while, by offering a glimpse of 'innocence'.

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