

## **Transforming Identities: An Ecocritical Reading of David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life***

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He wants at last to appear before her [...] in his own form, 1[...] the new self [...] a self that has journeyed into the underworld and come back both more surely itself and changed.

(Malouf CCC 211-12)

The issue of identity has at all times remained a universal and problematic one. Confronted with multiple identities, an individual manages hard to find out an unique identity and an affordable space of his own within the ever changing and heterogeneous socio-cultural, ecological, geographical and political scenario. Identity, its quest and allied issues have engaged the critical attention of many a writer across continents and countries, albeit the differences. The research article titled **Transforming Identities: An Ecocritical Reading of David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*** proposes to look at *An Imaginary Life* from an eco-critical stance and through the lens of its protagonist Ovid tries to scope out as to how he has evolved an identity of his own following his close proximity with nature. His self undergoes a massive transformation in relation to his attitude towards nature as well as life in general.

Instinct for survival underscores the pragmatics of the existence of human lives. Since time immemorial, man's relationship with nature has remained a problematic one, as he attempts to create and establish a bond with the nature around. Further, the positive and symbiotic relationship of man with nature cannot be ignored, as nature has served as an eternal and pervasive influence in the construction and (re)creation of man's identity. The literary world has witnessed the production of numerous texts dealing with the human-ecological interface and exploring the dynamics of man's physical and psychological attachment with immediate ecological influences around which play a great role in shaping the contours of his identity. Such a complex and arcane interrelatedness has triggered a host of theoretical discourses which are embedded in literary texts. As Glen Love opines:

“As the circumstances of the natural world intrude ever more pressingly into our teaching and writing, the need to consider the interconnections, the implicit dialogue between the text and the environmental surroundings, becomes more and more insistent. Ecocriticism is developing as an explicit critical response to this unheard dialogue and attempts to raise it to a higher level of human consciousness. Teaching and studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life seems increasingly short-sighted, incongruous.”(18)

Born in Brisbane in 1934, George Joseph David Malouf is one of the famous writers of contemporary times. At the age of twenty-four, Malouf left Australia for Britain. From 1959 to 1968, Malouf worked as a relief teacher in London and in Birkenhead, and from 1962 to 1968, he served as the school master of St. Anselm's College in Cheshire, England. He then returned to Australia to teach at the University of Sydney where he stayed until 1977. Malouf's literary oeuvre is prolific with numerous volumes of poetry, an autobiography, many novels and short stories. His first book of poetry was entitled *Bicycle and Other Poems*. Some of his popular novels include *Johnno* (1975), *An Imaginary Life* (1978), *Harland's Half Acre* (1984), *The Great World* (1990), *Remembering Babylon* (1993), and *The Conversations at Curlew Creek* (1996). Malouf has won numerous awards and honours for his works including the Grace Leven Prize for Poetry and the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal both in 1974, the New South Wales Premier's Fiction Award 1979 for *An Imaginary Life*, the New South Wales Premier's Award for drama for *Blood Relations* in 1987, the inaugural IMPAC Dublin Literary Award valued at 100,000 Irish punts in 1996 for *Remembering Babylon*. He is also the recipient of the Australia Council Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature in 2016.

In *An Imaginary Life*, Malouf lays before the readers the impact of the natural environment on its protagonist Ovid, and the extent of the transformation of his identity. Placed within the theoretical framework of ecocriticism, the text offers an insight into the intricacies and discrepancies involved in the man-nature relationship. As a branch of literary criticism, ecocriticism emerged in the early 1990s, and has ever since been put into use by scholars and critics. Coined by William Rueckert in Glotfelty's 'The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology', ecocriticism throws light on the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Man's place in the spatial construction of nature has to be reckoned with.

Ovid, a famous Latin poet is forced to undergo exile following an unstable political situation in Rome. Having been placed in a strange and unfamiliar land, Ovid finds himself in absolute wilderness. Dislocated from the socio-cultural ramifications of his familiar world, Ovid feels a lack of verve and a sense of flagrant loneliness. Displacement and dislocation inevitably lead to identity crisis, thereby raising questions about the nature of existence. As a symbol of culture, Ovid's life in Tomis perturbs his mind and it becomes a site of conflict arising out of the lacuna in the spatial constructions between culture and nature. Ovid's socio-centric approach is evident in the opening lines of the narrative when he says: "It is the desolateness of this place that day after day fills my mind with its perspectives. A line of cliffs, oblique against the sky, and the sea leaden beyond. To the west and south, mountains heaped under cloud. To the north, beyond the marshy river mouth, empty grasslands, rolling level to the pole." (*IL* 6) Ovid's mental space marked by loneliness is in consonance with the desolation of the physical space of Tomis. Failure to meet with his aspirations is reflected in Ovid's psychological morbidity which undoubtedly takes a toll on one's sense of identity. In Tomis, Ovid is confronted with various symbols of nature such as the cliff, the sea, the sky, the mountain, the river, the grasslands. All these sights and sounds induce him to rethink on his very 'place' in the 'space' he now occupies. He feels himself a misfit, though surrounded by the glory and grandeur of nature around.

When a person is surrounded by the salience of a 'place,' his identity is inevitably and actively influenced by the meaningful physical environment. Against the landscape of Tomis, Ovid too is controlled by its natural environment, and he allows himself, though gradually to an alien space in order to survive both physically and emotionally. The familiar 'place' is now being replaced with the unknown and unfamiliar 'space.' Tomis by itself stands for a surreal place where his identity undergoes transformations and he assays to comprehend the surroundings. Following his interaction with wild nature in the form of river, scarlet poppy and wild boy, Ovid's perspective towards the world and life itself gets altered. The wild boy is a product of virgin nature, untouched by human interactions, and therefore emerges as an embodiment of nature. Ovid comes under his influence, and his philosophical transformation is immense. Here, the dichotomous parameters of being civilised and savage and human and animal are called into critical enquiry when Ovid accepts and adapts himself to the new 'space' where he strives to create a 'place' of his own. Here, the landscape of Tomis can be perceived as a physical 'place' and he tries to come to terms with it.

Human identity is indeed enigmatic, and is undoubtedly shaped and influenced by the physical and geographical attributes of a place. Having undergone the process of evolution over a period of time, Ovid crosses over from the civilised Augustan Rome to the uncouth remote Tomis on the Black Sea coast. The archaic grasslands in Tomis with its serene natural environment emerges as a symbol of hope, as his identity gestures itself in favour of the mental abstractions lingering over his mind. "The time has come at last. Far to the north, deep in the grasslands that roll away towards the pole, is the place I have so often dreamed of in these years of my exile, walking out under the high moonlit clouds in my sleep."(*IL* 81)The mystic nature of the grasslands envisioning a future for Ovid enables him to tide over the disillusionment ensuing from his psychic trauma.

The highly complex and enigmatic nature underlying the relationship between man and nature is problematized in critical discourses engaging with 'space' and 'place'. The strange, unfamiliar 'place' replaced with known, familiar 'space' focuses on his positioning in defining his identity. His affiliation with the objects of nature helps him overcome his despair and dejection as is clearly evinced in the serenity and maturity of his mind. As Buell observes "space... connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction", whereas "place is space to which meaning has been ascribed."(4)To the uncivilized barbarian local villagers of Tomis, their identification with the untamed, pristine world around is natural unlike in the case of Ovid for whom the process becomes problematic in the initial phases of his acclimatisation with the 'place.' In the proximity of nature, the transformation of Ovid's self becomes complete. As he himself acknowledges "It is summer. It is spring. I am immeasurably, unbearably happy. I am three years old. I am sixty. I am six. I am there."(*IL* 90)

Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* moves beyond an ordinary depiction of nature to a critical engagement with the powerful impact of the physical environment embodied in nature on configuring a man's identity.

### Works Cited

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