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## UNIT 4 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND COMMUNICATION

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### Structure

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this Unit, we will mainly discuss the narrative technique and the problem of language and communication in the novel.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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A novelist can tell a story in many ways. The narrative of *Remembering Babylon* has been examined and commented on by several Australian literary critics and theorists. Narrative in modern fiction is complex because it is experimental and innovative. As you have probably learnt from your study of the British novel, there are various narrative techniques. This unit will focus on Malouf's way of telling us the story of Gemmy Fairley and the early years of Colonial Australia.

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### 4.2 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

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*Remembering Babylon* is unique for the genre shifts in its narrative technique as it moves from straightforward narrative to flashbacks, diary entries, records of journals and a mystical and poetic evocation of the landscape. It has been called a mixed narrative with dual perspectives. The novel re-imagines a key moment in Australian history – the contact between the settlers and the aborigines and between the settlers and the land. The novel is one of the many revisionist novels of early Australian settlement. Other Australian authors such as Eleanor Dark, Kylie Tennant, Rodney Hall, Thomas Keneally and Robert Drewe have all attempted to re-image this phase of Australian history. The narrative technique evolves from the act of remembering and is part of the 'Memoir' tradition in Australian fiction. The title resonates throughout the work. What are the problems that one is likely to encounter in analysing Malouf's narrative technique?

The first is that of incompleteness or rather the suggestion of incompleteness. The novel introduces the reader to the lives and circumstances which are not fully realised. The narrative withdraws in space and time from the core of the story. The promise of a saga is cut short by the truncated story. The novel shifts constantly from saga to historical fiction, the satire of colonialism. There is no sustained narrative mode. There seem to be many books in *Remembering Babylon*. In keeping with his

the novel serves as the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world.

**Structure,  
Characters and  
Metaphors**

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### **3.5 LET US SUM UP**

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We have, in this unit, mainly discussed the structure of the novel, the characters the metaphors and the epiphanies.

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### **3.6 QUESTIONS**

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1. Write a note on the structure of the novel.
2. Discuss the main characters
3. Critically analyse the metonyms, the epiphanies and the metaphors.

fictional technique this novel is also short (only 200 pages), almost like a novella, but it also resembles the epic in its scope and ambition. If Malouf's *The Great World* dealt with the Anzac experience in the Second World War, *Remembering Babylon* deals with the history of outback pioneering in the 1850's.

The narrative is fraught with the anxiety of "remembering" to maintain links between generations. It is also a narrative of the extraordinary about the ordinary. One is reminded here of R.K. Narayan's ordinary characters and their extraordinary heroics. The novel begins with the observing consciousness of a child; Lachlan of Malouf's technique seems to be expository rather than dramatic - more showing than telling. There is a story within a story as Gemmy's story later because a part of the aborigines is the communal store of narrative: "In time his coming among them became another tale they told and he would listen to it with a kind of wonder" (p.29). This is the Australian version of the American "captivity narrative", stories of people abducted by Indians. Gemmy's story is also a version of the lost child story in Australian fiction and painting, such as Marcus Clarke's "Pretty Dick" (1869) or Joseph Turphy's *Such is Life* (1903). The lost child story is a kind of commentary on the harshness of the Australian bush or outback. Gemmy, thus, becomes a prototype of the lost child and the captive. The landscape description in Barbara Baynton's stories are echoed in the description of Gemmy when he is first spotted by the children.

*"In the intense heat that made everything you looked at warp and glare, a fragment of ti-tree swamp, some bit of the land over there that was forbidden to them, had detached itself from the band of grey that made up the far side of the swamp, and in a shape more like watery, heat struck mirage than a thing of substance, elongated and airily indistinct, was bowling, leaping, flying towards them"*(p.4)

Problems of form arise when Malouf starts numerous stories in such a brief novel. There is a digressiveness in the technique with the introduction of smaller stories such as the sketch of Mrs. Hutchence from Malacca which Malouf leaves unresolved. The story of the local school teacher, George Abbot is another vignette. Juxtaposed with this is the more sympathetic response of Mr. Frazer. Malouf makes Frazer the vehicle for some sentimental appreciation of the aboriginals, as the true inhabitants of this Promised Land though it seems like Babylon to the settlers.

Through Frazer, Malouf takes the reader to another story away from the outback, and to the residence of Governor Bowen. Malouf's mild satire ridicules this attempt to recreate the home country in an alien environment.

Malouf is also aware of the Australian saga novels of the inter-war years. In these fictions, the settlers bravely combated natural forces of fire, flood and drought. All this is implied subtly and with the greatest ceremony in *Remembering Babylon*. The saga material is narrated through the consciousness of Ellen McIvor as she remembers arriving in Brisbane and her past in Scotland.

The narrative contains what is known as Malouf's disappearing acts' where characters conveniently disappear such as the McIvors and Gemmy Fairley. The narrative takes the form of a revisionist text as it reimagines Australia's colonial history. There is nostalgia for imagined historical moments, in this case the early years of colonial settlement.

The narrative technique is also intimately connected with the mystery of language. It is through the mystery that people and land meet in a moment of epiphany that transcends space and time.

Malouf has never been a writer of voluminous novels. In fact all the novels are rather short. *Remembering Babylon* is only 200 pages long and the twenty chapters include several flashbacks and one fast forward. "Malouf is one of the strict economists - of the imagination - a major talent who feels compelled to express himself in miniature"

(Peter Craven). His canvases are usually small, he is no Tolstoy or D.H. Lawrence nor is he a Patrick White or Christina Stead. The cinematic technique is enhanced to great visual effects as the novel draws to a close. The narrative has a symmetry in that it begins and ends with the same characters.

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### 4.3 LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN REMEMBERING BABYLON

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In his more recent novel *Remembering Babylon* Malouf returns to similar themes as those in *An Imaginary Life*, but moves from the fringes of the Roman empire to nine tenth-century Queensland, Australia. The struggles of characters to achieve wholeness in this novel are taken up not through silence as they were in *An Imaginary Life* but rather through an emphasis on sensory and gestural communication.

**The sensory group receives the most attention in this novel, highlighting examples which seem to emphasize the transformative nature of these non-verbal communicative experiences;** many important scenes explore the experiences of three major characters, Jock McIvor, his daughter, Janet, and Gemmy Fairley, the young man who after living among the Aborigines for sixteen years, joins a pioneer community. Before working more closely at Janet and Gemmy, we note a significant scene with Janet's father, Jock. He is walking alone in a field, reflecting on how he has changed since Gemmy arrived, when he experiences a kind of epiphany:

Wading through waist-high grass, he was surprised to see all the tips beaded with green, as if some new growth had come into the world that till now he had never seen or heard of. When he looked closer it was hundreds of wee bright insects, each the size of his little fingernail, metallic, iridescent, and the discovery of them, the new light they brought to the scene, was a lightness in him – that was what surprised him like a form of knowledge he had broken through to. It was unnameable, which disturbed him, but was also exhilarating; for a moment he was entirely happy. (P107)

**This sensory experience is typical of many in the novel. Jock McIvor uses his bodily senses (sight, hearing, touch) to see the reality of the Australian landscape anew. He responds to his new vision with feelings of surprise disturbance, and joy. And notably, the knowledge that he gains is unnameable; that is he cannot express it in rational, discursive language, experiencing it instead through his senses.**

Later in the novel, Janet McIvor, the eldest daughter of the family that has taken in Gemmy Fairly, has a similar experience. **The experience is non-verbal too based entirely in her body and senses.** It also allows her to understand Gemmy fully for the first time. In this short but pivotal episode, Janet goes to visit Mrs Hutchence to help with the beekeeping Janet has already found that beekeeping is deeply satisfying to her; she loves the bees now and finds them a necessity... as if without them she could never enter into her own thoughts" (138). Her sense that without the bees she could not enter her own thoughts – her language is important. **She realizes that both the discursive and non-discursive are essential to fully experiencing life, that both are essential for full cognitive life. And it is significant that her understanding come through bees, animals which have a sophisticated system of communication themselves.** In this scene, it is as if Malouf has joined the human sensory capabilities with an animal communication system to symbolize Janet's transformation. Although Janet is about to have a life altering experience, she initially denies the significance of the scene, thinking that there is no mystery in the tableau of bees, clouds of billowing smoke, and the sun as dazzling sparks. Eventually, however, she realizes that it is communicative, as Malouf writes that for her the scene "– just the same, touched on something, just at the edge of thought, that

she could not catch hold of' (139). In its emphasis on the power of the non-discursive, the parallels with her father's experience described above is striking.

Then, as Janet goes to work with Mrs. Hutchence, a swarm of bees alights on her, covering her body quickly and in a single cloud. "She just had time to see her hands covered with plushy, alive fur gloves before her whole body crusted over and she was blazingly gathered into the single sound they made, the single mind" (142). At this point Janet's rational mind tells her to stand still that the bees will not sting as they are already full. She then distinguishes between she calls her old mind (the one that uses verbal language and tells her what to do) and her "new and separate mind" her new mind – one that is linked to the sensory and the bee – tells her "you are our bride" and it is outside her body, drumming and swaying above the earth (142). Janet links this new mind and the mind of the bees to her body and its new phase signaled by menstruation. As she stands still, and realizes that it matters not whether she is girl, woman, or tree. Mrs. Hutchence and Gemmy appear with the smoke that attracts the bees. The bees peel off her body. "Like a crust, till she stood in her own skin again which was fresh where the air touched it" (142-43). Her skin seems new to her now and she remains 'a little out of herself'. Gemmy and Mrs. Hutchence fret over her. Later after she is grown up and has become an expert on bees, she remembers the experience as both a physical "bodily excitement" and a time "when her mind had for a moment been their unbodied one and she had been drawn into the process and mystery of things" (143). Here Malouf clearly suggests that the verbal and the sensory are needed to come to an understanding of the mystery of life, or to put it another way, to understand fully one's mental life. Janet experiences a kind of "wholeness" that Malouf himself in a video interview, has said is one of his primary concerns in his novels. ("An Imaginary life" 1987).

Malouf writes that Janet is surprised that she does not appear changed to Mrs. Hutchence, because to her, her old body has been born a new. Furthermore, after the experience Janet has a vision of herself not as a gawky girl, but as a ch-----stump black and bubbling. Since she sees this image "through Gemmy's eyes". She is convinced of its truth. This ability to see through Gemmy's eyes for the first time is representative of her deepened understanding of him; she cannot understand who he is solely through discursive language and her intellect – she needs a sensory experience such as the one with the bees to come to such as understanding. Knowing that she sees for the first time from his perspective enables her to experience unity between body and mind. The experience is transformative and could not be accomplished without Gemmy and the sensory knowledge provided by the bees.

Indeed, Gemmy is linked with James from early on in the novel. Throughout the novel, Gemmy is presented as a character with two important characteristics. First, he is the catalyst for the other characters growth and transformative experiences. Second, he is the one character who has integrated the various non-verbal forms of communication. As a fully sensory human, Gemmy literally sniffs, tastes, looks, gestures, and silently listens his way through the novel. One early episode that will serve as an example of the importance of gesture for Gemmy occurs after he has just entered the white settler's homestead and tries to communicate with them. A few English words begin to come back to him, but it is gesture that he relies upon to tell the story of his sixteen years with the Aborigines:

All of which he made them understand partly with signs, partly with words that he dragged up at need, but in such a distorted form as he hummed and hooted and shot spittle out of his mouth, and tried to get his tongue around them that it was the signs their understanding leapt at.(10)

The settlers try to read his gestures and Gemmy, also learns to read their non-verbal gestures. At first Gemmy has difficulty reading their "wooden expressions and gestures" and it is only later, after much watching and study, that he is able to understand and distinguish the small signs that made them trackable:

...the ball of gristle in the corner of a man's cheek, which you could actually hear the soft click of if you listened for it: the swelling of the worm like vein in a man's temple just below the hairline, the tightening of the crow's feet round his eyes. The almost imperceptible flicker of pinkish naked lids.... He saw these things now, and what astonished him was how much they gave away. Perhaps their faces were more expressive because he could catch these days more of the words they used even the ones they left unspoken. So long as he was deaf to the one he had been blind to the other. No more.

Here Gemmy shows his understanding of the necessity of both verbal and non-verbal communication systems: it is significant, too, that he arrives at his insight long before any of the white settlers reach a similar understanding. Tragically for Gemmy, however, he too undergoes a transformation, but it is a reversal of Janet's. Gemmy begins to rely more heavily on verbal discursive language, the English of the settlers, having preciously used his knowledge of gestures, signs, and his senses to be his guide in understanding and reading them. Gemmy dies as a result of his attempts to master verbal language. First he dies symbolically when the rain washes the written words (i.e. the so-called story of his life). Off a piece of paper, the language that he thinks has captured his strength but is nothing more than the scribbling of school boys. Then he dies again when he disappears from the novel and the world of Janet and Lachlan. In one sense then, discursive language, especially the written, is responsible for his demise. Gemmy gives it tremendous power which undoes him, and the settlers use the difficulties with verbal language as their sources of distrust and suspicion of Gemmy.

Thus, these experiences of Janet and Gemmy, demonstrate beautifully the paradox of verbal language; it has both creative and destructive elements, containing the potential to bring about psychic wholeness or disintegration and death.

To sum up: *Remembering Babylon* is preoccupied with the role of non-verbal communication experiences in the quest for wholeness and unity. The novel emphasises other aspects of non-verbal communication, notably the sensory. Powerful episodes centred in bodily sensation are shown to lend to life-altering experiences for Janet McIvor, Gemmy Fairley, and others. Further the revelatory ending of *Remembering Babylon*, with its echoes of incantation and epiphany, highlights Malouf's exploration of how one knows and experiences the world and whether unity and transformation are possible. Janet McIvor's final memories of Gemmy Fairley as she watches the day's light dying away suggest that a fully connected life – one in which communion with other humans, animals, or nature – lies within our grasp Malouf writes that the light and the sea approach each other. "As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach one another."(200) The syntactic linking of 'prayer', 'knowledge', and 'one another', as well as their denotations and connotations, intimate the larger existential and epistemological question that drive Malouf's fiction.

As an avid reader, you must have observed that as a writer Malouf combines a deep understanding of linguistic behaviour with a singular aesthetic vision.

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#### **4.4 SOME MORE ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE**

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In the earlier section we discussed the language and communication in the novel: in this section we will discuss some more aspects of the language and we may repeat some of the points discussed earlier. The repetition, I may remind you, is meant for reinforcement in distance education.

*Remembering Babylon* is an extraordinary parable of exile, identity and language loss. Malouf is preoccupied with communication and explores the relationship between verbal and nonverbal communication or the lack of it in his poetry and fiction; for example: in the poem entitled "To be Written in another Tongue" and in the short story, "The only speaker of his Tongue". Language for Malouf plays a vital role in the construction of identity. Language is also connected with the theme of exile, and is thus a strong theme in much of his writing.

The novel's complex shifts in chronology and focus yield a dramatically simple story. The marginalisation of Gemmy's story results from the fact that it is merely one more element in the parable of alienation and assimilation. And this is developed through a meditation on language and identity. The novel is a study of colonization through the prison of language. Language mutation and language loss underlines the narrative. Gemmy loses his language being away with the aborigines and acquires a new one. He tries to get back to the White settlement to "put the words back in his mouth". The novel becomes a microcosm of all-linguistic adaptation and change.

Ironically the McIvor family who adopt him are from Scotland and so do not speak English. They too experience language loss. George Abbot tries to teach his rugged pupils English words that they would never be able to relate to the visionary Mr. Frazer's data on local flora in the native tongue. Gemmy knows that there are no words in English for the natural life of Australia. **Gemmy has this mystical view of the oneness of language and environment that he got from the aborigines and which he passes on to Frazer.**

**The inability to adapt linguistically is matched by a failure to adjust culturally. The Australian landscape is named with a European sensibility. Distant England becomes a point of reference for the things relating to Australia.**

Malouf employs nonverbal communication such as gestures, silence, sensory communication; and animal communication systems. Human language for Malouf is only one of the sign systems in the dense network of signs in the world. Gemmy experiences a wordless unity during his meeting with the aborigines. Silence becomes a positive experience for Gemmy as it did for Ovid in Tomis. The characters struggle to achieve a unity of being through sensory communication. Jock McIvor, Janet and Gemmy rave this sensory experience. Jock experiences a oneness with the land as he walks alone in a field. He uses his bodily senses to see the reality of the Australian landscape since he has thought he cannot express his knowledge in rational terms. Janet too has a similar experience in bee-keeping which allows her to understand Gemmy for the first time. Her understanding comes through the bees - insects with their own sophisticated system of communication in the animal world. Janet cannot understand Gemmy through her rational intellect. She needs a sensory experience. This use of sense perception links Gemmy with Janet. Like Ovid, Gemmy has a transforming effect on the other characters. His senses were shaped by his life with the Aborigines. Gemmy sniffs, tastes, looks, gestures and silently listens his way through the novel. He relies chiefly on gesture to tell his story of his 16 years with the aborigines. Gemmy begins to rely on the verbal language and this leads to death. First he dies symbolically when the rain-washes off the written words on the paper, which he thinks, is a record of his life. He dies again when he disappears. Gemmy gives language a great power and this kills him. What Malouf demonstrates in this novel, in the experiences of Janet and Gemmy is the paradox of the verbal language. It can be both creative and destructive. The themes of language and exile are used to explore transformation. The revelatory ending of the novel with its incantatory effects is almost like an epiphany. Some critics see Malouf as a kind of structuralist. He tends to set up binary opposites such as mind and body, home and exile, nature and culture, dream and reality. Verbal and non-verbal language is another. Malouf aims for a reconciliation of these binary conflicts and is conscious that each is part of a pair and are required for creating a wholeness in life, for a complete experience of the world.

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## 4.5 REPRESENTING THE ABORIGINAL

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White perceptions of the aboriginal form part of the tradition of Australian fiction. Three early Australian novels that deal significantly with the Aborigines are *Ralph Rashleigh* (1840's) by James Tucker, *The Emigrant Family* (1849) by Alexander Harris and *Fifty Years Ago: an Australian Tale* (1864) by Charles de Boos. Others followed such as Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardo* 1929, Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1939) and Poor Fellow My Country (1975) and Eleanor Dark's *The Timeless Land* (1941). This literary tradition continued into the 1950's, 60's and 70's with such works as Randolph Stow's *To the Islands* (1958), Peter Mathers' *Trap* (1966) and Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1972) and Nene Gare's *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961).

Current fiction in this area has undergone a transformation. Rodney Hall's *The Second Bridegroom* (1991) is a reassessment of early perception of the Aborigines. Then there is Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows*, which explores white violence on the Aborigines. *Remembering Babylon* represents a current trend by the White Australian authors while writing about aborigines to look backwards. To try and reinvent them as the peaceable inhabitants of a pre colonial Eden is perhaps safer than dealing with the present situation. In the *Remembering Babylon*, another novel about a white man who has lived with the Aborigines in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, we see the Aborigines at one remove from the author. Malouf's entry point into the alien (to the Europeans) world of the aboriginal culture is teenager Gemmy Fairley who has spent his formative years among them and becomes an object of curiosity, suspicion and bigotry when he returns to white settlement. Geirmain Green's attack titled "Malouf's Objectionable Whitewash" may have consolidated the novel's position as a literary landmark but it focussed attention on Malouf's representation of the aborigines. Malouf keeps the reader on the periphery of the aboriginal life. We only glimpse them by proxy, through the agency of Gemmy. In fact Malouf has been accused of stereotyping the borigines' spirituality in his description of Gemmy's meeting with them on the farm. Green felt that Malouf relegates the Aborigines to mere symbolization of the white mans Id and for not including the fact that European settlement introduced disease, displaced the the Aborigines from their land and filled it with unsuitable livestock. The Whites called the Aborigines savages and did not refer to themselves as invaders. But Malouf is conceived with the fears of white society that the Aborigines might try to drive the whites out. This is still evident in the objections to the Maho decision. Suzanne Falkiner confronts Green's attack with the view that Malouf's book is a work of the imagination, a metaphor and poetic novel. Malouf has stated that the inherent fear of aboriginality implicit in many Europeans including himself is one of the subjects he is trying to address in the novel.

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## 4.5 LET US SUM UP

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We have discussed the peculiarities of the narrative technique used by David Malouf and also analysed the problem of language and communication in the novel.

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## 4.6 QUESTIONS

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1. Given an account of David Malouf, the writer and his work.
2. What links do you perceive in the fictional worlds created by David Malouf?
3. Comment on the major themes and preoccupations in the fiction of David Malouf.



4. "Remembering Babylon reflects the major concerns of a trans-cultural writer"  
– Discuss
5. How does Malouf re-imagine Australian colonial history in *Remembering Babylon*.
6. *Remembering Babylon* exhibits a tension between remembering and forgetting. Discuss.
7. Comment on the importance of place or setting and its use in *Remembering Babylon*
8. Consider Gemmy's function as a 'between-world's character.
9. In *Remembering Babylon* does Malouf compare Indigenous and European worlds or does indigeneity merely feature as the backdrop for colonial performance?
10. Contemporary writers often speak of the politicisation of space in terms of "margins and periphery". Can you perceive this dictionary in *Remembering Babylon*?
11. Malouf is not concerned with language but the failure of language to fully encompass experience. How does this manifest in *Remembering Babylon*?
12. Comment on *Remembering Babylon* as a mixed narrative of contact.

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#### 4.7 SUGGESTED READING

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