



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**THE IMPACT OF WAR ON DAVID MALOUF'S NOVELS:
A HISTORICAL-BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH**

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By

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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The purpose of this study is to show that Malouf's novels embody a historical fact that the author and his country Australia were severely affected by war. The historical-biographical approach is applied to examine three novels by the Australian writer David Malouf: *Johnno*, *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World*. It is observed that in these novels war in terms of effects forms the central theme. However, the historical-biographical approach assumes that literary work is reflective of two histories: that of the author himself and of his country.

Malouf's biography reveals that he is a son of a family fated by war. And his childhood was shattered by events of the Second World War. The history of Australia documents that people of this country were exposed to many deadly effects of the two global wars. Therefore, Malouf's writings came to relate how war affected him and his country.

In *Johnno* (1976), the memories of the author on his family and society under the Second World War combine to form the substance of his first fictional work. In terms of his personal life, the progress of



war was a source of worry and fear for his family, and he was filled with horror when the Japanese invasion of his hometown became imminent. In terms of his country, the war took men away into Europe, and their women and children were left to meet not only the economic demands of war but also to meet the sexual needs and criminal tendency of thousands of American soldiers who supposedly had come to defend Australia against an expected Japanese invasion. The people of Australia were also thrown into an intellectual disorder as they looked for an identity that does not oblige them to go to battlefield again whenever the British are involved in a new war.

In *Fly Away Peter* (1983), the author relates that his countrymen were vulnerable to another effect of war: death and injuries. Men, misguided by the propaganda that war makes history, came to the front lines as volunteers. They had to live the horrors of war and lose their comrades to death and injuries before they understood that war is the real enemy of human beings.

The Great World (1991) shocks readers when it provides evidence of the effect of war on Australian prisoners of war in the Japanese detention camps. The effect was most destructive. This effect takes the form of food shortage, disease, mistreatment and compulsory exhausting work. These factors caused death to thousands of Australian prisoners.

With these facts, the novels serve not only to document the effects of war on Malouf and his country, but also serve to provoke people into a belief that war is terrible and all should stand against any war.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi syarat untuk ijazah Master Sastera

**KESAN-KESAN PEPERANGAN DALAM NOVEL-NOVEL DAVID MALOUF:
SATU PENDEKATAN SEJARAH-RIWAYAT HIDUP**

Oleh

HUSSEIN ALI ABBAS

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Pengerusi: Dr. Noritah Omar

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Kesan-kesan Peperangan dalam novel David Malouf: *Johnno*, *Fly Away Peter* dan *The Great World*.

Tiga novel yang ditulis oleh David Malouf ini telah membuktikan banyak fakta sejarah mengenai Australia mahupun dirinya sendiri. Tema utama yang digunakan adalah peperangan yang telah menjejaskan teruk negara Australia.

Novel-novel ini turut menyingkap kisah Malouf sekeluarga yang hidup menderita akibat Perang Dunia Kedua. Zaman kanak-kanaknya penuh akibat pelbagai peristiwa yang menghayat hati dari peperangan yang teruk itu. Bahkan semua rakyat Australia turut merasai bahang derita tersebut.

Di dalam *Johnno*, Malouf menyentuh proses peperangan yang menjadi punca kegelisahan dan ketakutan keluarganya. Kemasukan Jepun menyebabkan kaum lelaki dibawa ke negara Eropah, meninggalkan kaum wanita bersama anak-anak yang terpaksa menyara hidup sendiri. Lebih menyedihkan, mereka dijadikan habuan nafsu ganas tentera Amerika yang sepatutnya memberi perlindungan dari serangan Jepun. Rakyat Australia turut mengalami krisis peribadi dan kehilangan

identiti apabila dilarang menyertai perang bersama British sedangkan Britain adalah negara ibunda mereka.

Fly Away Peter menceritakan ancaman maut dan penderitaan akibat peperangan yang dihadapi rakyat Australia. Rakyat dikelirukan oleh propaganda yang mengatakan peperangan akan mencipta satu sejarah. Maka ramailah rakyat menawarkan khidmat sebagai sukarelawan perang. Namun pada hakikatnya perang adalah musuh sebenar manusia kerana apa yang mereka alami hanyalah kesengsaraan mental dan fizikal.

Manakala *The Great World* mengejutkan pembaca dengan pelbagai bukti penyiksaan ditanggung oleh rakyat Australia yang menjadi tahanan tentera Jepun. Kezaliman Jepun menyebabkan rakyat kekurangan makanan, wabak penyakit yang merebak, buruh paksa dan penderaan yang teruk. Faktor ini mengakibatkan beribu-ribu tahanan Australia maut.

Berdasarkan pengalaman Malouf, novelnya telah menjadi satu dokumen sejarah yang amat penting buat tanahairnya. Di samping memberi kesedaran kepada manusia amnya agar meyakini bahawa peperangan adalah kemusnahan yang patut ditentang habis-habisan.

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 6th June 2003 to conduct the final examination of Hussein Ali Abbas on his Master of Arts thesis entitled “The Impact of War on David Malouf’s Novels: A Historical-Biographical Approach” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree.

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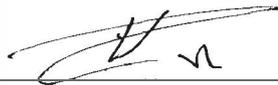
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for the quotation and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.



HUSSEIN ALI ABBAS

Date: 24 July 2003

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In days where war is imagined as a monster, those who survive and remain alive come to the conclusion that in wartimes the really lucky people are not the survivors but those who die before they become vulnerable to the various types of suffering, displacement, starvation as well as the ordeal of looking for a new identity.

Nobody exactly knows how and when the monster has entered this sunny seaside town to turn life here into a hell. Sure, it chose a moonless night, a time when people used to be peacefully sleeping unable to sense the new comer to their town. As it settled here, the monster started to assassinate the town's men one by one throwing into the streets, each day, hundreds of orphans and widows to be socially damned as troubles making people rather than victims.

This research examines three of Malouf's novels from the perspective of war and its effects on Australian society, applying the historical-biographical approach. This critical approach assumes that the author's biography and experiences as well as the socio-historical conditions of the country are necessary in making interpretation of any literary works. Therefore, this research has to make use of Malouf's biography, his experiences with war and the historical studies written on Australian society under the First and Second World Wars.



Although history and literature grew up to assume two different identities, no one can deny the fact that there is a great overlap between these two disciplines. Both are mainly concerned with revealing the events of time, even though they approach events in different ways. Historians present events on the basis that all aspects of the narrated event at their disposal should be collected and recorded chronologically. Novelists, however, concentrate only on those aspects of history that will either make an interesting story or assist them in getting across the message that they desire to make. Although selecting a historical event to produce a fiction plot depends mainly on the writer's interests and his/her intended theme, authors usually choose the most critical events in history that had the greatest effects on humans. Thus, war emerges as one of these events.

There is no historical event that captures writers' attention as war does. The devastating effects of war on the author himself or his society often provide intriguing substances for writings. In these writings, the author tends to elaborate on these effects as that give him an opportunity to express and justify his anti-war ideology. The First and Second World Wars, more than any other wars, created a space where these novelists could imagine the ugliest and most dishonorable scenes in human record. David Malouf is one of these novelists.

Born in Brisbane in 1934, David Malouf is the second generation of a Lebanese Christian family that came to Australia in the 1880s. His grandfather escaped compulsory military service, and the civil war that was taking place between Muslims



and Christians in his native Lebanon under the rule of the Turks. In *Johnno* (1976), Malouf reveals “if my father’s father hadn’t packed up one day to escape military service under the Turks;... I wouldn’t be an Australian at all” (52). His mother, of Sephardic Jewish origin, came from London to live in Brisbane just one year before the First World War.

David Malouf is a prominent contemporary Australian writer. He started his literary activities in poetry but it is his war novels which have widely attracted the attention of critics. He has written nine novels and four collections of short stories plus other literary works such as drama and autobiography. Malouf has been given several awards: the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal, the Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction and the Pascall Prize for achievement of excellence in creative writing.

As a young man, Malouf left Australia for Europe, and settled in Italy for more than twenty years. While there, he wrote his early novel *Johnno* where a sense of alienation and the question of identity emerged as the most dominant themes.

Being fascinated by history, Malouf includes historical events germane to the Australian experience to construct the framework of his novels. Characters and events are constructed to show the impact of historical turning points; for example, war in relation to Australian society. Each fictional character is heavily tasked with revealing an aspect of the historical instability of this geographically isolated continent.



Once in an interview conducted by Tom Shapcott, Malouf expressed his concern with the way Australians approach the history of their country. He says:

We really know nothing about the real past. All we know is what we have chosen from the past that looks to us as if it leads up comfortably to what we think of as the present. The real present is always a mess, a confusion, a mixture of forces- and of course the past at any moment was just like that as well (Shapcott 29).

The above reveals the author's belief that the history of Australia has not been fully narrated. Malouf believes that there are some uncomfortable aspects in Australian history that have been intentionally left untold. Malouf's novels became my literary project to detect the dark aspects of the Australian experience with war is consolidated as the author Malouf says:

We [Australians] have a history which begins in darkness; not in hope and light at all...But it is surprising how much despair, cruelty and suffering is really at the heart of the Australian experience. We keep rejecting that experience, it seems to me. Maybe we need fiction for that, too; to take us back again, to make us face up to the suffering and the cruelty that we do not want to recognise at the center of our experience. (Nettelbeck 31-32)

David Malouf himself grew up in a family with untold history. He lived in a house with a grandfather who did not speak English, and a father who did not tell him of his family history as his mother did. It was very strange for the child to see his grandfather surrounded by his ethnic Arabic friends talking and laughing every night in their house in a language he did not understand. It is clear there was a gap, in terms of relationship, between the son and his father on the one hand and grandfather on the other hand. This gap provided Malouf with the motivation to investigate the history of his family. This investigation led him to realize that a bitter experience of war had pushed his grandfather

to desert their native country and migrate to Australia. Hence, Malouf's novels are written with the intention to reveal the most painful parts of Australia's experiences with war and his family war-troubled history which had been both kept unknown.

Statement of the Problem

In novels where the historical facts of a society are subjected to an author's literary imagination, one feels that he is not only living the narrated experience of war but also to be one of those victims in the fictional world. It is one of the effects the author seeks to impose on readers.

It is observed that war and its effects on Australian society form the nucleus of a few of the novels by David Malouf. These novels serve to document and criticize the Australian experience of war through the effects that war has left on the author's personal life and the experience of Australian society as a whole. The main thrust of these novels is to identify and unravel these effects. One may argue that war was the main reason that made Malouf a writer because it changed him personally and it created a society around him that required understanding. Thus, Malouf's war novels could be seen as a catharsis for both himself and his country.

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this research is to make connection between facts of history and fictional imagination. To attain this purpose, efforts were made to show how the author

personalised the experience of war. And the nation's record was investigated to reveal in what way the historical facts were exploited to produce novels that take readers into a direction of anti-war. In order to further relate facts of history and fictional imagination, the study examined Malouf's biography and the ways war influenced the author's life and family. The present study identifies the ways in which he personalised his experience of war.

In addition, the present study examines the history of Australia in order to see how Malouf explored events of that history. By identifying such events of history, one can isolate those aspects which were important to the Australian experience of war. Thus, Malouf's personalised accounts of war through his creative works make significant contribution in understanding Australian war experience.

The Conceptual Theory

This study deals with Malouf's novels, *Johnno*, *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World* as historical novels in which the characters and events are accurately surrounded by events of war. This study examines these novels by using the historical-biographical approach for the following reason. Besides documenting the historical experience of war, these novels have some biographical pattern. While *Johnno* partially relates to Malouf's life that was troubled by war, *Fly Away Peter* (1983) and *The Great World* (1991) echo the author's anti-war sentiments.

The historical-biographical approach suggests that any literary work reflects life and time of the author himself or the characters of that work. In other words, each fiction tells truths of a certain period of the past filtered through the author's individual insight and perception.

In his article *Literary Critical Theory: Background*, Michael Delahoyde explains that “to understand a work you need to understand the author's social background, the author's life [and] ideas circulating during the time the author was writing” (1). Delahoyde makes another important remark when he advises analysts of the literary texts to consult “the other works [which] influenced the creation of the one under examination”(1). In this way, books of history that provide the novelist with the ideas to plot his fiction should be used as reference for any historical-biographical approach analysis on literary work. Therefore, this research uses not only Malouf's biography but also his cultural background and the historical books that impressed him and provided him the substance to write his two novels *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World*.

Burris gives history a greater importance in his historical-biographical analysis of text. In his article *Literary Criticism: An Overview of Approaches*, Burris suggests “it is necessary to know about the author and the political, economical, and sociological context of his time in order to truly understand his work” (2). This suggests that the world the author attempts to create in fiction is indeed the real world in which the author was living. It follows then that this research needs to study the history of Australia as the only way to understand the depth of Malouf's novels.

A Handbook of Critical Approaches of Literature gives the historical-biographical analysis a similar framework. The authors of this book provides a unique example on how this critical approach is used in the analysis of historical novels. The authors believe that “a historical novel is likely to be more meaningful when its milieu or that of its author is understood” (23). The book suggests that readers “familiar with” the French Revolution would understand Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* better than others. And John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* is fully appreciated when readers makes a historical study of the American society which was affected by the economic depression during the years of the third decade of last century.

To understand David Malouf’s novels, it is necessary to know the historical background. In *Johnno* for example, we read that the arrival of General MacArthur to Brisbane frightened the protagonist and gave him a sense that the war was threatening his country. It is too difficult to understand the protagonist’s fear because the novel left General MacArthur and the purpose of his arrival unexplained. Anyway, it is history rather than the novel that explains that General MacArthur was an American military leader who came with his army to defend Australia against an imminent Japanese invasion. Knowledge of the intellectual currents, artistic trends, the economic situation, the politics and the writer’s private life are essential in analysis of literary text.

This approach looks at literature as a vehicle that drags readers into a certain point of history in which the author’s intended meaning becomes clearer. In other words, the value of a literary text depends on to what extent the text is capable of transporting readers into some historical points of time. To that extent, the intended meaning of the

text exists. For example, David Malouf has written three novels on war because he was concerned with war. The value of these novels was not only in the author's anti-war attitudes. The value-added beauty of Malouf's novels is that they have the strength to take readers into some selected points in the history of Australia. At these points, readers are able to live the experience of war reflection and its effects on Australian civilians and servicemen. Because of these points of history and under the influence of the narrated experience, readers unconsciously construct their own attitudes about the war. Such attitudes are mental constructs of people who "experienced" war not as fighters in battlefields but as readers in fictional texts.

In *Johnno*, the author portrays the effects of the Second World War on his life and society. *Fly Away Peter* (1983) and *The Great World* (1991) concentrate on the effects of war on Australians in battlefields and camps of prisoners of war respectively. The framework in this research is one to show a three-way reality of inter-relationship and inter-dependence between the events of war, the arising attitudes that were constructed and the impressions on characterization in the novels.

Scope of the Study

Making use of Malouf's family history and his biography, this study concentrates on Malouf's novels *Johnno*, *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World*. These three novels can be considered as Malouf's war trilogy as they examine the effects of war on both Australian civilians and servicemen. This scope is structured in Appendix A.

Significance of the Study

Although there have been some studies conducted on Malouf and his writings, none of these studies have focused on the war theme. Previous studies have looked at Malouf's sense of exile from the real world. For example, Nettelbeck in *Reading David Malouf* (1995) asserts that Malouf's sense of place and attempts at remapping the world, reflects his sense of exile from the real world. Philip Neilsen looked at Malouf's themes of identity such as "Australian-ness". In his introduction to *Imagined Lives: A Study of David Malouf* (1996), Neilsen believes that Malouf's notion of nationalism may help Australian society to understand their culture and their environment. Hansson in *Sheer Edge: Aspect of Identity in David Malouf's Writing* (1991) prefers to study Malouf's fictional ideas that "search for selfhood and identity" (5).

The significance of this research is not only confined to the examination of three novels to portray the effects of war on the author's society, that is, Australia. This research also assists us with our understanding of other nations' struggle with war. War afflicts nations in different ways and for different reasons, but it brings about similar effects. For example, the effects of the Second World War on Australian society were not different from the effects that afflicted the Iraqi society during the war of this country against Iran. The war put the conservative social values of both societies, Iraqis and Australian, in danger.

Therefore, the significance of this research is the fact that it gives people from different nations the intellectual perspective to see the experience of war and its negativity at all times.



CHAPTER II

IMAGES OF WAR IN LITERARY TEXTS

It is vital for this research to furnish a comprehensive background on war and its effects on individuals. For this purpose, it attempts to provide accurate images of war out of three main sections: first, the emergence and development of Australian war literature. Second, criticism on David Malouf's novels. Third, Malouf's biography and his war-affected family.

The Emergence and Development of Australian War Literature

War is a political term, which usually refers to a violent conflict between two parties. This word is also used to describe other types of conflict, such as class war, commercial war, and so on. The military philosopher, Karl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), sees that violence is the essence of war, and war is an act of force to compel our adversary to do our will. Therefore, force is the means. To impose our will upon the enemy is the object.

The 20th century was a century of war. History shows that mankind in the past decades has witnessed and tasted all various types of war namely civil, regional, global and cold wars. As a result, no part of this universe has been untouched by the effects of war.



The first global war which claimed lives of millions, and wiped dozens of towns out of existence has created a new reality. Novelists, like scholars of other human disciplines, had to deal with facts of the post-war reality, and a literature that could explain what happened and what was happening was in great demand in the post-war era. As a result, a new type of literature called war literature was born.

Although experiences of war vary from one nation to another, these experiences give rise to novels of a common feature. These novels have the tendency to focus on the impact of war on individuals rather than war itself, and thus influencing the public to oppose war. Some writers like Ernest Hemingway and Erich Remarque focus in their novels on what happened to individuals on battlefields, others like William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald focus on people in societies, and how individuals are alienated from their societies because of the cultural changes that was brought about by war.

The birth of Australian war literature was unique and has its own characteristics. Historically, Australia never invaded, nor was invaded by any of the neighbouring countries. Its involvement in world-scale wars was to support the British military operations mostly to protect their old colonies or bring into reality the colonial dreams of British Empire of expansion. This means that Australians had been fighting not to defend their country but to portray themselves as part of the English Nation. By this, war becomes an identity-associated issue.

The interaction between issues of identity and war deepened when Australian servicemen who had been fighting overseas returned home after armistice. These