

# The Controversial Dialectic of the "Self" and the "Other" in Alexander Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed*

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**ABSTRACT---** *Alexander Buzo's Norm and Ahmed is one of the most outstanding Australian plays dealing with general human yet contemporary issues of particular interest in post-colonial studies as well as multi-cultural literature. This paper explores the play in terms of the problems of racial prejudice, social mobility, and the isolation of non-English speaking immigrants in Australia in the 60's, who are aliens in color, religion, and culture. In addition, it examines the character of Norm, who not only exists in a multicultural neighborhood of a growing city, but also suffers from the isolation from his own white race. Therefore, he seeks someone to communicate with, but that encounter, which happens to be with a young Pakistani student, eventually juxtaposes the numerous differences and overtones of an "Aussie" and an "other"; leading to an unexpected clash not only on a personal level but also on a cultural one.*

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*Norm and Ahmed* – a play by Alexander Buzo, who is recognized to be the “principal Sydney playwright of the late 1960s and 1970s” (McCallum, 1995, p.118) – is one of the best Australian one-act plays produced in 1967 and performed for many years. In "Glimpsing the Hidden World: Australian Directors on Rehearsal", Laura Ginters states that the “birth” of Australian theatre is marked from the emergence of such plays in the late 1960s and early 1970s (p.47). *Norm and Ahmed* deals with general human yet contemporary issues as it presents stereotypical characters, a lack of a precise time structure, and above all, universal themes of cultural superiority and hegemony. These themes represent a microcosmic image of larger incidents in the overall global context even at current times.

During the time the play was produced, Australia was experiencing social, cultural, and political changes that formed its artistic identity. *Norm and Ahmed* basically deals with racism as well as the sense of belonging and alienation in a somewhat originally homogeneous society. As many Australians had hardly seen or met foreigners not too long ago, the play offers an implementation of the cliché-ridden statements and the profoundly rooted stereotypical images in mass media that are adopted by most of the “Aussies” against foreigners at large. In his article on Alexander Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed* and *Rooted*, Terry Sturm says that the play portrays an image of racial prejudice and a profoundly irrational aggression and hostility in the behavior of ordinary Australians.

A major reason behind this ideology is actually imperialism. Edward Said says in *Culture and Imperialism*: “culture is a sort of theatre where various political and ideological causes engage one another” (p.xiv). In terms of chronology, none of the two characters fits into the roles of the colonizer or the colonized. The play was published in the late sixties of the twentieth century, when Pakistan, the country of origin for Ahmad, is a free and independent country, and when Australia, Norm's homeland, is not even an imperialistic nation. However, the play could be read as a play within the context of imperialism in which Norm and Ahmad can be differentiated and opposed. Both characters have inevitably inherited a long history in which their ancestors were either colonizers or colonized.

The history that has been bequeathed to Norm is, supposedly, a glorious one, in which the white man has always assumed superiority. On the other hand, the history to which Ahmad belongs seems rather a history of defeat and domination by the invading colonial British Empire, in which Ahmad's ancestors had always been inferior to the white Englishman. In *Orientalism*, Said states that:

The actual color of their skin set them off dramatically and reassuringly from the sea of natives, but for the Britisher who circulated among Indians, Africans, or Arabs, there was also the certain knowledge that he belonged to, and could draw upon the empirical and spiritual reserves of, a long tradition of executive responsibility towards the colored races (226).

The white man has always been portrayed as a heroic figure in the lands of the darker non-European others. The audience of *Norm and Ahmed* could sense a reversal of the traditional roles assigned by history to both the white self and the dark other. The character of Norm reveals a sharp contrast and a keen sense of alienation from the classical heroic

white man who is often found, for instance, in Indian fiction of Richard Kipling, or Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, or Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*.

Those writers of fiction belong to a literary canon that helps construct the white man as a heroic figure who dominates the darker other. This fiction has also influenced the images and the behavior of those men who are also involved in a colonial setting.

Through the means of imperialism, the East has furnished Europe with "one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other" (*Orientalism*, p. 1). The traditional imperialist white man is equipped with an urge to dominate. Apparently moved by the desire for adventure and exploration of other lands, the white man-like Robinson Crusoe tends to create little kingdoms that are products of his imperialist culture. The heroic figure of Crusoe has been granted an extraordinary power to transfer and create kingdoms and civilization, into the wilderness: "my island was now peopled and I thought myself very rich in subjects; how like a king I looked. First of all, the whole country was my own mere property, so that I had an undoubted right of dominion.... I was absolute lord and lawgiver" (p.217).

Likewise, this exceptional capacity is reflected in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, where the white protagonist is described as a man who, appeared as a creature of another kind and a different essence. In the territories of the dark other, Lord Jim is presented as a dominant guardian, a heroic ruler and master: "He was like a figure set up on a pedestal to represent in his persistent youth the power and perhaps the virtues of races that never grow old that have emerged from the gloom" (p. 265).

Generally speaking, the traditional white man is a heroic, idealized and dominant figure who can endure all the hardships and prevail. He is a courageous figure that has inherited and preserved the glories of his ancestors. However, in *Norm and Ahmed*, the white man of the play is not heroic enough to bear and maintain the burden of glory and pride bequeathed to him from his white colonial ancestors. Norm seems to be alienated from the history in which the white man has been portrayed as a mythical, larger-than-life, and glorified hero.

Moreover, Helen Barry argues that the name of both Norm and Ahmed has an explicit cultural background. The name 'Norm' does not only suggest its relation to a "great white" citizen, but it also suggests belonging to a commoner, who can be just any "Aussie". It is a most fitting name as Norm in the play is the archetypal middle-class and average-educated Australian, who views that there is "no room" for any person of a different cultural identity. Ahmed, on the other hand, happens to represent everything that Norm dislikes. He is a foreign, ambitious, and hardworking student, who expresses a lot of politeness when listening to Norm's accounts of his participation in war.

The mere fact that Ahmed, as the name strikingly suggests, belongs to a different culture and religion poses a great threat to Norm, who was trying to lecture the former about Australian values in a superficial manner. This implies that Norm regards Ahmed, the stranger, with unease due to the oddness of his behavior, which is exemplified by stopping Ahmed in the middle of the night, while going home. In this regard, both Norm and Ahmed are no longer viewed as mere stereotypes, but rather as archetypes since their encounter is sensed as not only a meeting between two men but also a confrontation between two different cultures: The culture of the white versus the dark and the culture of the superior versus the inferior. All of this results in the culture of the "self" versus the "other". One may argue that even though Australia tried to eradicate the policy of the dominance of the white race in its land, many white "Aussies" retained racist tendencies.

According to Katherine Brisbane, Norm is desperate for a conversation as he throws his already lit cigarette and puts a new one in his mouth at the time that Ahmed, whose appearance shows he is not white, approaches. This ambiguous behavior is followed by several actions of a similar nature, which intensify the audience's sense of menace and suspense triggering a shift in mood. Nothing much happens in the plot, so what attracts the audience's attention is basically the dialogue illustrated in annoying arguments, questions, and apology from Norm between now and then. However, all of this mounts and finally leads to the abrupt climax of Norm's physical attack against Ahmed.

This shocking action, which concludes the play, left a profound mark on the face of the Australian society. In retrospect, it may be inferred that Ahmed was doomed by Norm from the very beginning of their encounter just because he was different. This idea is supported by the existence of a briefcase in the earlier production of the play which was substituted by a backpack in the recent one. The existence of whether a briefcase or a backpack shrouds Ahmad with suspicion as it poses as a source of some kind of threat. His tenaciousness of either the briefcase or the backpack suggests bewilderment.

Taking into account all of these accumulative implied negative impressions by Norm, one may argue that Ahmad is not only perceived as foreign but he may also be regarded as a potential terrorist carrying bombs or weaponry against the natives of the country especially if the play is read in a modern global context. No doubt, there is a great deal of misunderstanding and misinterpretation on the part of Norm. To illustrate, Ahmed's polite attitude of listening to Norm's tales must have been misinterpreted by the latter as an arrogant attitude rather than a proper one. In other terms, this misinterpretation amounts in tension that ends in an unfortunate attack.

Despite his attempts to prove otherwise, Norm throughout the play seems helpless in the face of the darker other, Ahmed. Unlike his ancestors, Norm is no longer possessed with a sense of command and power. Unlike, for instance, T. E. Lawrence who has a consciousness of pride for being an Englishman among Arabs by stating that: "We English who lived abroad among strangers went always in the pride of our remembered country" (p.544). Norm's consciousness of such a separate and superior identity is not so strong. He calls Ahmed "mak", but deep inside he feels inferior to him: "You think you're a bit about me. You don't want to talk to me" (p.12).

This feeling of inferiority has transpired clearly because of Ahmed's articulate and masterful use of the English language at the time that Norm's use of certain words and phrases obviously show a less sophisticated man. Ahmed never uses expressions like "poofter", "bloke", "boom", or "a kick in the crutch and a cold frankfurter finish you off" (p.13). Norm's lack of education and sophistication manifests itself many times in the play despite his attempts to assert that, at least, his job involves some kind of sophistication:

I wear a white shirt and tie under me dustcoat, though. I mean I'm not sort of technically a white-collar worker, but I wear a white collar, Y'see? I mean, there's a bit of a fine distinction involved in this. Y'see, I'm not always in the warehouse - I spend a lot of time in the office, checking invoices and ratifying a few anomalies. (24-25)

Later in the play, he asserts that Ahmed could stay in Australia without any language obstacles or barriers: "...you should settle down out here- there's no language barrier. ...You can speak the Queen's English" (p.32-33). However, once more, Ahmed's superiority over Norm manifests itself not only in language and education, but also in ambition. Whereas Norm's ambition is simple "...it'd be all right for you to stay here,...get a job and stay in this country" (p.27). Ahmed's ambition is far more sublime as he says: "When I obtain my degree, I intend to return to Pakistan and attempt to render assistance to the under-privileged peoples, perhaps to undermine the position of the over-privileged peoples" (p.22).

Ahmed is superior to Norm because he has dedicated his life to a noble cause, achieving social justice. Again Norm tries to convince him of the blessing of living in Australia by stating that: "You wouldn't have that in Pakistan, now would you? You could set yourself up very nicely out here... look at me. I've got a good job; good pay... a reliable firm, nice personnel" (p.29). But Ahmed declines the offer by declaring: "My primary concern is to gain a liberal education and my secondary concern is to gain a deeper understanding of human behavior" (p.37).

In the figure of Norm, Buzo has created a false heroic self that was demolished by the once-was- "other", Ahmed. Many times in the play, Buzo suggests dissociation with the legacy of the heroic white man. At the same time, the great barrier separating the once-was-master from the once-was-slave is brought down the call upon Ahmed to merge with the Australian white community:

Norm: You know, as I was saying, Ahmed, you could do all right for yourself if you stayed out here. After you got your degree, you could stay here and be a useful asset. ...You'd be welcome out here, I can vouch for that. The people'd treat you just like one of their own, no risk. (p.28)

In doing so, Norm implies that the colonial myth is desiccated and abandoned. Despite his passivity and incompetence, Norm does not easily accept that the glory, power, and authority of the white man are declining. Sometimes, and despite his attempts to conceal them, his arrogance and aggressiveness come out to the surface. Karen Crawley says that Norm attempted to conceal the racism he felt against Ahmed through a forged tolerant behavior that could not hold for long (p.262). This attitude clearly shows itself at the end of the play through his violence and contempt for Ahmed:

*(Norm punches Ahmed in the stomach, then in the face. He grabs Ahmed's head and bashes it against the post. Then he flings the limp body over the hand rail).* (p. 40)

To sum up, mastery of speech and thought clearly indicate that Norm is no longer the master dominating Ahmad, the darker other. His usage of foul language against Ahmed toward the end of the play is also a strong indication of exasperation. His violence against Ahmed at the very end presents his characters as a passive and helpless Australian possessing none of the glorious history of his white ancestors. Norm is portrayed as a disintegrated white man struggling, in vain though, to maintain the colonial power and his idea of a dominant self. Buzo renders Norm's inept imitation of the traditional white man against the darker Pakistani "other". This implies that what is left of the traditional colonial white

hero is only a ridiculous figure scorned, due to Norm's unjustified attack of violence that functions as an ultimately hopeless and failed attempt to maintain his presumed superiority.

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