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**Australian Aboriginal History Through Fiction:
A Study of Kim Scott's Novels *True Country* and *Benang***

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

submitted by

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2008



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Certified that the dissertation entitled “**Australian Aboriginal History Through Fiction: A Study of Kim Scott’s Novels *True Country* and *Benang***” submitted by **Chakpram Priyanka** to the Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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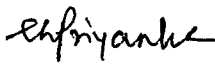
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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This dissertation titled “**Australian Aboriginal History Through Fiction: A Study of Kim Scott’s Novels *True Country* and *Benang***” submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in full or part, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.


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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation work to my mother – the spring and driving force of my life who taught me to overcome any obstacle and continue living with hope.

“There is always light at the end of the tunnel.”

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ABSTRACT

Kim Scott is one of the leading Australian Aboriginal novelists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As a writer he has experimented with the genres of fiction, prose, essays and has written several articles for journals. He has also tried his hand at poetry. His two major novels, *True Country* (1993) and *Benang: From the Heart* (1999), brought him instant recognition, literary accolades and several awards for fiction. I was drawn to his fiction, especially *Benang*, by his narrative technique that synthesized the semi-autobiographical mode with fictocriticism. The themes of the two novels seemed equally exciting and that was impetus enough to choose Kim Scott for my M. Phil dissertation, which has the underlying theme of “fiction and Black history.” Using Fiction as a platform, his novels talk about the Australian Aboriginal history since the arrival of the European colonisers (as narrated in *Benang: From the Heart*) and the present day situation/plight with which the Natives are still living (as depicted in *True Country*).

My dissertation not only makes a critical assessment of the two novels, but also provides information about the social and political needs for the adoption of the policy of Assimilation, which, in turn, led to what has come to be termed as the Stolen Generations. The dissertation has five chapters.

CHAPTER ONE is in the nature of Introduction to my work. It is divided into two sections. Section I, titled “Kim Scott’s Life and Works,” provides general background information about the author and his works, while Section II talks about the great Australian Silence that was carefully cultivated by the white historians in so far as the marauding and exploitative activities of the colonizers towards the natives are concerned. All historical events are presented with a slant.

CHAPTER TWO is a critical appraisal of Kim Scott’s first novel *True Country*.

CHAPTER THREE provides important facts about the white government's policy of Assimilation which aimed at the merging of the Indigenous people into the ostensible ideology of a White Australia through biological absorption in the first phase of this policy and then, later on, through the application of cultural absorption in the second phase of this assimilationist policy.

CHAPTER FOUR is critical appraisal of *Benang: From the Heart* against the background of the policy of Assimilation.

CHAPTER FIVE has been aptly titled as "Conclusion." Here, I have stressed on the main theme of both the novels which basically is on the presentation of reality through fiction and the author's attempt of criticising the white system by using the genre of novel writing.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

I

Kim Scott's Life and Works

As an introduction to Kim Scott, I would like to quote from his two novels that I am working on for my M. Phil. Dissertation. In the author's biographical note in *True Country*, Kim Scott is briefly described as "of Aboriginal and British Ancestry."¹ But as his writing evolves, so does the person he is. In his later novel *Benang: From the Heart*, Scott is acknowledged to be "a descendant of people who have always lived along the south-east coast of Western Australia ... one among those who call themselves Nyoongar."² Here, we witness a shift in a sense of self, indicating a journey.

Eldest among the four children of a white mother and an Aboriginal father, Kim Scott was born in 1957 in Perth. He now lives in Coolbellup, a southern suburb of Perth, Western Australia with his wife and two sons. His extended Nyoongar family is best known by the family name Roberts, a name given to one of his ancestors by a policeman whose name was Roberts and his ancestor was given the name Robert's Boy, which – as Scott himself puts it – is "not a particularly pleasant way to gain an English name."³ He grew up speaking only the acquired English language and was totally unaware of his native mother tongue. He only actively started learning his Nyoongar language as an adult. He avows that "it's a constant reminder of how tenuous is an Indigenous identity, without a language – other than the discourse of politics – with which to affirm it."⁴

¹ Kim Scott, *True Country* (Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1993) n. pag.

² Kim Scott, *Benang* (Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999) n. pag.

³ K. Kunhikrishnan, "Identity Narratives," *The Hindu Online*, 6 April 2003, *The Hindu*, 13 June 2007 <<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/lr/2003/04/06/stories/2003040600180300.htm>>.

⁴ Kim Scott, "Strangers at Home," *Lingua Franca*, 2007, ABC, 21 June 2007 <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/linguafranca/stories/2007/2018700.htm>>.

His family shifted to Albany, a southern coastal town, in the 1960s. Kim Scott attended a school in Narrogin, an inland town, where he soon began to realise the constant issue of racism that a large community of Nyoongars were subjected to. Kim Scott later enrolled himself in the Murdoch University, located 15 km south of the central business district of Perth. He later dabbled with a variety of occupations – as an anxious clerk with the Department of Morbidity in the Bureau of Statistics, an audio-visual technician and an English teacher in Portugal. He taught English for some time in urban, rural and remote secondary schools including at an Aboriginal community in the north of Western Australia.⁵ Teaching provided him with spare time which he utilized for writing. His brief stint at the remote region of Kimberley in Western Australia resulted in his venture into fictional writing.

Kim Scott was deeply affected by the plight of the Aboriginal natives and his exploration of the neglected race resulted in the publication of his first outstanding novel *True Country* in 1993. It took him four years to publish this book. He incorporated many real facts that he came across in this remote region into his novel. For instance, he used details of Kimberley topography in the novel to create his fictional land of Karnama. He also “borrowed from the dialect and past of one community I had lived in.”⁶ Its edition in a French translation was published in 2005.

For writing his second novel *Benang: From the Heart* (1999), Kim Scott conducted research for five years to trace his family history. He studied welfare files and a diverse number of other sources. He confirmed that the novel was inspired by research into his family and “my growing awareness of the context of that family history.”⁷ Using similar methods as in *True Country*, his second novel too is a creative merging of imagination, reality and archival documentation to reconstruct the shameful and suppressed Black history of the country. He illustrates the White treatment of Australian Aboriginal people in his work without being didactic or endorsing bitterness or moral propaganda.

⁵ “Scott, Kim.” *Austlitt*, 11 Feb. 2008, keywords: Kim Scott.

⁶ Scott, author’s note, *True Country* n. pag.

⁷ K. Kunhikrishnan.

Both these novels were influenced by his life and research into his ancestral history and, therefore, have semi-autobiographical tinge in the narration. The themes of these novels have been described as “explor[ing] the problem of self-identity faced by light-skinned Aboriginal people and examin[ing] the government’s assimilationist policies during the first decades of the twentieth century.”⁸ He was deeply concerned with the acute economical and cultural poverty of the Aboriginal Nyoongars. It bothered the writer that the Aboriginal people were denied opportunities and facilities to improve their conditions and arrest the disintegration of their culture.

It was novel writing that shot him into the international literary arena. *Benang: From the Heart* lifted this incipient novelist into limelight. Kim Scott was honoured for this second novel with the Western Australian Premier’s Book Award for Fiction and Overall categories in 1999. He further went on to become the joint winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2000 along with Thea Astley for their respective novels *Benang: From the Heart* and *Drylands*. He also claimed the Kate Challis RAKA Award for Creative Prose in 2001 for the same novel. Scott is the first indigenous Australian writer to win the Miles Franklin Literary Award. *Benang* has since then been available in France and the Netherlands translations. Chair of the 2001 RAKA judge’s committee and Director of the Australian Centre, Dr. Kate Darian-Smith describes *Benang* as “a major Australian novel” and “a brilliant and mature work” which “stood out for the epic scope of its complex narrative, the taut rhythms of its language, and the sheer vigour of its imagery.”⁹ The juries’ report further stated that:

Benang is a confronting novel, and Scott pulls no punches in tracing the family history of Harley, a man of Nyoongar ancestry, in the wake of white settlement.... But despite moments of brutality and pain, Scott’s narrative spirals outwards, and the day-to-day resilience of its central characters does in the end, promise some form of healing, and of hope.¹⁰

⁸ “Scott, Kim,” *Austlitt*.

⁹ “Indigenous writer Kim Scott takes \$10,000 RAKA award,” *University of Melbourne*, 19 March 2007, The University of Melbourne ABN, 10 June 2007 <http://uninews.unimelb.edu.au/articleid_190.html>.

¹⁰ *ibid*.

Kim Scott admits that he has been motivated by Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* as an example of a different way of writing a historical novel. The few writers who, he admits, have motivated him consist of: Peter Carey – the Australian novelist who has won the prestigious Booker Prize twice, Helen Garner – another famous Australian writer and the Israeli writer Amoz Oz whose novel *Elsewhere Perhaps* particularly inspired Kim Scott.

Scott, along with the illustrator Peter Kendall, has written an illustrated children's story named *The Dredgersaurus* in 2001 and his third work *Kayang and Me* was published in May 2005. Jointly written by Kayang Hazel Brown and Kim Scott, *Kayang and Me* is set in the Southwest of Western Australia. Brown, head of a large extended family, brings to bear on this work a vast store of memories and stories of the past, and family and kin relationships, which help Scott's quest for his identity and his association with Brown's family and his connections with the large Nyoongar community.

Conversational in style, the voices of both Brown and Scott are cleverly interwoven and at the same time clearly individuated in the text. The novel is in the nature of Scott's reaction to Brown's oral accounts. The novel provides portraits of characters as they emerge from the memories of the authors. With these sketches, the Nyoongar world comes to life. This work is a monumental oral-based history of the author's large extended family and there is nothing overtly black or white about it. He also wrote a novella named *Lost* published by Southern Forest Arts in 2006.

Apart from these works, he has also contributed numerous articles to various Australian journals. "Between Black and White" published in *The Bulletin* (Vol.120 No.6326 May 2002), "Covered Up With Sand" in *Meanjin* (Vol.66 No.2 2007), "Fresh and Supple Language" in *Southerly* (Vol.62 No.2 2002) and "Asleep (from: *Naatj*, a novel-in-progress)" in *Westerly* (Vol.50 November 2005) are some to be named. He also has poetry and short stories published in a range of anthologies. His collection of short stories include "An Intimate Act" (1993), "Registering Romance" (1995), "Dallas' Dad" (2000), "Into the Light: (after Hans Heysen's painting of the same name)" (2000),

“Damaged but Persistent” (2000) and “Capture” (2002). Other articles and essays that he has written so far are “Disputed Territory” (2000), “Kim Scott: Writer, Coolbellup” (2001), “A Sense of Who I am” (2001), “Stories Dig Deep into Family Law” (2005) and “Strangers at Home” (2007). He also wrote “Native Title” for BBC Radio. In recent years, he has received grants from the literature Board of the Australia council and the Western Australian Department for the Arts and these have enabled him to devote more time to writing.

He has also been a guest at many writers and Indigenous arts festivals in Australia and a Visiting Scholar at the University of Melbourne. He was one of the guest speakers in the 2001 Century of Federation Alfred Deakin Lecture Series in Melbourne, Victoria. In 2001 he wrote the forewords for *Untreated: Poems by Black Writers* and *Talking Straight: Publishing Aboriginal Writing* and on May 10, 2004 he gave a talk on the topical theme “Diverse, Doggo or Dead? Australia’s Cultural Identity Now” along with the other award winning Australian authors Janette Turner Hospital and Robert Drewe for *Globalisation and Identities: A Literary Forum* in Melbourne. It was a series of three literary forums presented in collaboration with the Centre for Postcolonial Writing, Monash University. The other notable writers present at the conference were V. S. Naipaul and Homi Bhabha.

He has worked extensively in education and presided over a number of education and arts boards and committees at local, state and national levels, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board of the Australia Council. He has also been a member of the Wilomin Aboriginal Corporation.

However, in spite of his loyalty towards his Indigeneity, Kim Scott faces criticism from his own people. He admits that he has knocked on the doors of people who are unknown to him and the doors have not been opened. In his speech “Australia’s Continuing Neurosis: Identity, Race and History” at the Alfred Deakin Lectures in 2001, he recounts the situation he has been at and how hostile his own people have been so far:

“Wadjila” (a white person), “Wadjila,” the voices on doors have not been opened. “Wadjila,” “Wadjila,” the voices on the other side of the door say. And you can’t trust wadjilas. The experience, both sides of that door, tells me something about the damage that has been done.... I’ve heard what people say. I know most of the lines; that people claim an Aboriginal identity to get on the gravy train leading to all the supposedly massive financial benefits of being Aboriginal. It’s a fashion. And just how much aboriginality have you got in you anyway?¹¹

But Scott is not deterred by such hostility. He proudly carries around his little black heart as his inherent identity. He grew up thinking of himself as of Aboriginal descent and he gives the credit to his father for instilling in him this fact. It was his father who always motivated him to accept his aboriginality gracefully and with pride. He used to tell him that being an Aborigine is “the best part of you.”¹² His writing aims at the betterment of his own people. He knows that it is too early to comment on how his writing has influenced the Nyoongar people. But he wishes his writing “to be valued for the discussion it stimulates in the wider community, rather than for the writing itself.”¹³

In order to understand the full implication of his two novels, *True Country* and *Benang*, it seems imperative to have background knowledge of Australian history and how it has dealt with the Natives. It is the historical perspective that provides insights into much of the Aboriginal writing in the forty years or so. The following section of this Chapter is significantly titled “White Australia’s Black History” to underscore the double-dealing nature of the white governments that have presided over the destiny of Aborigines.

¹¹ Kim Scott, “Australia’s Continuing Neurosis: Identity, Race and History,” *The Alfred Deakin Lectures*, 15 May 2001, ABC Online, 20 June 2007 <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/deakin/stories/s291485.htm>>.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ K. Kunhikrishnan.

II

WHITE AUSTRALIA'S BLACK HISTORY

Establishment of Britain's penal colony in 1788 in Australia radically affected the lives of the Natives. Attempts to resist the white colonizers were effectively quelled thus bringing the Australian Aborigines under the control of colonial government. With passage of time, the Aboriginal people were eventually evicted from their traditional land, deprived of their traditional bush food and devastated by disease, malnutrition, poverty, alcoholism, violence and despair. They lost their language, culture and ancient ways of worship. Aboriginal women became the target of rape and abduction. Most Aboriginal people survived on the fringes of towns and pastoral properties or were herded onto reserves and missions. The State was the guardian of all aboriginal children and many (mostly half-castes) were taken away by force from their families to be raised (and abused) in institutions. They have become aliens, outsiders or the "other" in their own land.

In the last thirty odd years, Aboriginal history has become the focus of national debate and discourse. Leah Purcell in her play *Box the Pony*, Scene 16 says:

And if any of you fellas here see me having a cup of tea at one of those cafes, come over and we can have a yarn and you can tell me all about your mob, alright... But none of that history book bullshit, just your story.¹⁴

This clearly indicates the vehement opposition of the Indigenous people against Australian history as written by the white people in power. They call such tampered history "sanitized history" wherein the Indigenous people are represented as savages, backward and under-developed.

The common notion that Australia was settled in rather than invaded since the Natives showed no sign of resistance has now been proved wrong by writers such as

¹⁴ Scott Rankin and Leah Purcell, *Box the Pony* (Sydney: Hodder Headline Pty Limited, 2000) 123.

Henry Reynolds and W.E.H. Stanner. There have been enough evidences to verify the fact that frontier history of Australia was a “bloody one.” The Indigenous people had resisted with heavy losses, but white history is silent about this. The Aborigines were either assailed by treacherous remarks such as one made by Michael Dodson in the book *Blacklines* in which he characterised them as being bloody-thirsty, cunning, ferocious and marked by black ingratitude and base treachery, or they were just dismissed casually as people who were powerless to defend themselves against the whites. In short, the resistance by the Indigenous people was not mentioned in the history written by the whites and the misdeeds of the Europeans were whitewashed. Thus, in Australia there are two histories. Firstly, there is the “documented history” written by the whites and secondly, the “oral history” as told by the indigenous people which acts as a counter history. The hidden histories that were never told by the whites have begun to be told by the Indigenous people in the form of stories. In the act of telling their stories in the form of autobiography, fiction, poetry and plays they are deconstructing the white construct of black life, culture and history. It can be said that they are setting the record right. The telling of these stories acquires greater significance in the light of the political situation in Australia during the last few decades of the twentieth century.

A Review of Non-literary Works: Researches in Aboriginal History

Atwood and Foster in their “Introduction” to the book *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience* talk about the renowned Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner who, while delivering the ABC’s Boyer Lectures in 1968, had characterised the relations between the Indigenous people and the white settlers as “the great Australian silence.”¹⁵ According to Stanner, this negligence was not a simple act of “absent-mindedness” but something which was assiduously cultivated and in course of time it turned “into something like a cult of forgetfulness practice on a national scale,” in matters relating to the Indigenous people.¹⁶

¹⁵ Bain Attwood and S G Foster, *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2003) 1.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

According to Stanner, the historians are to blame for this silence as very little about Indigenous people figures in their works. In *Australia: A Social and Political History* (1955), edited by Gordon Greenwood, the reference to Indigenous people is made only five times. John La Nauze, a historian, concurs with Stanner's observation when he says that unlike the Maori, the American Indians or the South African Bantu, the Australian Aboriginal is noticed in history only in a melancholy anthropological footnote. Henry Reynolds, a historian, recalls how the editor of a prestigious historical journal told him not to waste his time on writing about Aborigines as there was nothing to say about them.

However, in recent years journalists and other supporters of Aboriginal cause have talked about how the Indigenous people have been deprived of their lands since 1788. Historians like Robert Manne and Peter Read criticized the barbarity of the Australian Governments' policy of snatching the half-caste children from their Aboriginal mothers in order to civilize them.

While Stanner complained about "the great Australian silence," Henry Reynolds started researching the "unexamined history" of Australia. In 1970-71 Charles Rowley in his book *Aboriginal Policy and Practice* presented a comprehensive survey of conflict between Aborigines and European intruders.

A younger generation of historians like Raymond Evans and Michael Christie tried in their works to overturn "a series of historical falsehoods regarding British colonization."¹⁷ They depicted colonization as an act of invasion and considered the frontier as a source of conflict which resulted in "bloody massacres" as a result of the resistance by the Aborigines. They made an attempt to prove that the settlement of Australia by the whites had resulted in a killing of many Indigenous people. In short the occupation of Australia was not a peaceful one.

¹⁷ Attwood 4.

In the 1970s these young historians estimated the number of Aborigines killed in the frontier conflicts. To begin with they said that violence could not have been responsible for the sudden decline in the Aboriginal population. In 1788, it was estimated that there were about 7,50,000 Aborigines and the numbers dwindled to a mere 60,000 in 1920. They found that the majority of the Aborigines died because of the diseases that were introduced with the arrival of the whites. Dirk Moses states that colonization “undeniably had ... a genocidal effect” on Aborigines.¹⁸ The cumulative research in Aboriginal history questions the assumption that the colonization of Australia was a peaceful act of discovery and settlement. It also proves that the first explorers and colonists of Australia were Aborigines and their history goes back to 40,000 to 60,000 years. The Europeans have dispossessed the original inhabitants who were the rightful owners of the land and this resulted “in violence, racial discrimination and neglect which destroyed many Aboriginal communities and degraded most Aboriginal people.”¹⁹ Broome provides the details of death in the frontier clashes in his chapter on “The Statistics of Frontier Conflicts.”²⁰

Statistics of Frontier Conflict Deaths

Historians	Europeans	Aborigines
Reynolds (1981)	2,000-2,500 dead	20,000 dead
Reynolds (1987)	3000 dead	20,000 dead
Broome (1982-88)	1000-1500 dead	18,000-20,000 dead

Political Situation

Aboriginal issues became more crucial in the context of national reconciliation (led by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation) and the High Court’s 1992 Mabo

¹⁸ Attwood 12.

¹⁹ Attwood 11.

²⁰ Attwood 96.

decision which went in favour of Eddie Koiki Mabo. He was the first one to bring his case before the Supreme Court in 1982 against the doctrine of “terra nullius,” which meant that at the time of European settlement, the Aborigines had no claim to the land as they were nomads. The following landmark decisions recognised the land rights of the aborigines and indicted the White Australia for following a policy of genocide against the original inhabitants of the continent:

The High Court's decision on June 3, 1992 recognised the Meriam people's common law rights to the native title and the 1996 Wik Native Title decisions.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1995-99 inquiry looked into the separation of Aboriginal children from their parents.

Keating, the former Prime Minister of Australia who remained in power from 1991 to 1996, considered the High Court's Mabo judgment a historic decision which, he thought, laid the foundation of greater understanding and more meaningful relationship between aboriginal and white Australians. He saw the title legislation as an act which would help Australia “recognise and make amends for past wrongs.”²¹

Robert Manne in his “Introduction” to the book *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (2003) discusses the difference between Keating and the Howard governments. The Labour Prime Minister Keating sought to promote reconciliation between the white settlers and the Aborigines. He openly confessed that many of the problems confronting the Aboriginal Australians were the result of dispossession, racism, inequality and injustice. In a speech delivered in Redfern, a Sydney suburb with a large aboriginal population, he openly declared:

We took their lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought disease. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children

²¹ Robert Manne, *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Melbourne: Black Inc Agenda, 2003) 13.

from their mothers. We practiced discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us.²²

This honest acknowledgement led to his party being voted out of power. He was succeeded by John Howard who was in power till very recently.

The report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (1997) revealed the history of separation and the total abuses that the children underwent while in care. The report equated the policies and the act of separation to genocide. It evoked emotional and sympathetic responses from the media and the public in the beginning. However, Prime Minister Howard's reaction to it was one of contempt and indifference. The report was not acknowledged and the government dismissed it as something ridiculous. As Robert Manne points out that the Howard government denied the existence of any "Stolen Generations" on semantic grounds. The recommendations for financial compensations to the separated children were also refused. The Howard government talked of something called as "practical reconciliation" which directed its attention on improvements in Aboriginal education, employment and health.

During the Howard years, a campaign was conducted against *Bringing Them Home* by the conservative magazine *Quadrant* and it was supported by a number of right-wing supporters and journalists. The campaign denounced the Aboriginal witnesses as notoriously unreliable. It was explained that the half-caste children had been removed before World War II with an honourable and humanitarian intention of saving them from being disliked, hated and ill-treated by their tribe and the removal continued after the war in order to protect the children from parental neglect and abuse. The authors and defenders of *Bringing Them Home* were accused of sentimentality, moral vanity and animosity towards Australia. The question of genocide raised by the report was dismissed

²² Manne 13.

with contempt. Keith Windschuttle in his essay published in *Quadrant* denied that any massacres of Aborigines had taken place. He also attempted to show that the tentative estimates of 20,000 Aboriginal killed on the frontier as suggested by historians such as Henry Reynolds and Richard Broome were an exaggeration and a fabrication. Windschuttle in his book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (2002) not only denied the “massacres” of Aborigines but also proposed a “counter-history” of British colonialism that identifies closely with the settlers. Windschuttle argued that the British settlers’ Christian faith and their adherence to the idea of the rule of law would have made the large number of killing of Aborigines a cultural and religious impossibility. He further stated that the indigenous Tasmanians were “primitive,” “maladapted” and “dysfunctional” and survived only by luck. The Tasmanian Aborigines, he believed, had no sense of “property” or any sense of “trespass” to cherish strong bonds of attachment to their lands. Manne sarcastically observed that “for Windschuttle, it appeared clear that a death which was unreported and thus undocumented was a death which had not occurred.”²³

In this hostile political situation where the injustices done to the Aborigines were denied or justified, it became imperative for the Indigenous people to voice their opinions through their stories to each other and to white Australia as a kind of resistance to the indifferent political situation in Australia. These oral sources – stories and interviews – provide different historical perspectives. Oral sources are used not so much to recover past events as to discover how these have been interpreted. These oral accounts enable white Australians to hear Aboriginal perspectives of the past rather than create a situation where these narratives might be effectively silenced. Thus it has become essential for the Indigenous people of Australia to preserve their culture, identity, history and land rights and to counter the obstacles placed by the Howard administration.

Resistance may be expressed in several ways. It may take the shape of voicing political opinions/differences in public or one may participate in rallies and demonstrations and resort to violence. Since violence had proved counter-productive,

²³ Manne 6.

their response assumed the nature of individual protest through works of art. For example, the Aboriginal playwrights are dramatizing their stories to present their view of their relationship with the whites. In this context one recalls Sally Morgan's plea in her autobiographical novel *My Place* (1987) in which she tells Nan that someone has got to tell or else things will stay the same – surely they won't get any better. Morgan seems to say that sharing of an individual story with black/white audience can have a socially, politically and culturally beneficial effect. The act of telling symbolizes resistance against the lies of the oppressors. At the same time, the act of telling or writing about one's suffering has a therapeutic effect as it provides release.

In "Unmaking White Myths: Your Laws, My Place," Broun quotes E. S. Nelson, who asserts, "Historically for black writers everywhere the art of writing has been a political enterprise, a revolutionary act of resistance."²⁴ It is a resistance against the white laws, white domination and white oppression. While physical resistance against the firepower and ruthlessness of white men has proved useless, black writing has become a tool to fight against the injustices done to them. Aboriginal writing strives to make white Australia aware of the mistakes and the crimes it has committed in the process of colonization. White Australians are made to see the past in a manner that has never been communicated to them by their government and the media.

Aboriginal playwrights strike an immediate rapport with the multicultural audience in the theatre by dramatizing their stories. In the act of performing their plays in Australia and other countries they are awaken the conscience of the international community which, in turn, exercises moral pressure on the Australian government and at the same time they serve the purpose of passing on the stories to their children, ensuring the preservation of their history and culture. More than anything else these dramatized stories result in spiritual cleansing.

²⁴ Jody Broun, "Unmaking White Myths: Your Laws, My Place," *Whose Place?*, ed. Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell (Australia: Angus and Robertson Publishers, 1992) 23.

Helen Thomson quotes Joy Hooton's words in her essay "Aboriginal Women's Staged Autobiography" that "No document has a greater chance of challenging the cult of forgetfulness than a black woman's autobiography."²⁵ While biography is defined as "the history of particular men's lives," autobiography is generally defined as writing about the self.

In the *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (1994), Brian Matthews states that the post-colonial autobiographical act is essentially political. It is this quality that has made the autobiography of today different from the earlier ones which were merely self-serving. As Brian Matthews says, "In all post-colonial literatures it has been the dedication to political, religious, and personal freedom in defiance of and in the wake of the oppressors that has 'opened the gate, and let autobiography in,' variously disguised."²⁶

In the present post-colonial context, autobiography has come to challenge the western assumptions of "self." In the Aboriginal Women's plays such as Deborah Mailman's *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1996), Leah Purcell's *Box the Pony* (1997) and Jane Harrison's *Stolen* (1998), the autobiographical mode is used as an attempt to articulate the "other." It does not subscribe to the notion of "self" as assumed in the western context. The self becomes a means of exploring larger and complex issues of nation, race and gender. What we find in these plays is a voice of testimony which contradicts the white Australian history. The efforts of the Indigenous people to tell their stories are very effective than the writings of the white historians about the Aborigines.

The indigenous people record their history in the form of poems, novels, lyrics, short stories and plays. Theirs' is an oral tradition that recounts events and they are subverting the western tradition of history writing which is basically dependent on archival records, contemporary newspaper articles, personal diaries and letters. The

²⁵ Helen Thomson, "Aboriginal Women's Staged Autobiography," *Siting The Other: Re-visions of Marginality in Australian and English-Canadian Drama*, ed. Marc Mauforts and Franca Bellarri (Bruxelles: P.I.E.-PeterHang, 2001) 26.

²⁶ Brian Matthews, "Life Writing," *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, ed. Eugene Benson and L.W. Conolly (London: Routledge, 1994) 856.

Aboriginal women's plays have begun to break "the great Australian silence" through their stories.

These stories serve as a counter-history. In short, they are talking back to the nation in one voice because the experiences they present are common to all of them. The Aboriginal woman's voice in the autobiographical plays expresses both individual and collective experience.

It is apparent that the Aboriginal autobiographical/semi-autobiographical writing or first person narratives, be it fiction, drama or poetry, are an attempt to reconstruct the past and at the same time provide a counter to white history that has relegated them to the realms of obscurity or non-existence. Kim Scott is in that tradition of using the autobiographical mode to provide a corrective to official history and create a national and international awareness about what has happened to the Aborigines of Australia. Both *True Country* and *Benang: From the Heart* are important in that they aim at awakening the conscience of the whites to the atrocities perpetrated by them and those before them on the first inhabitants of Australia. Scott's deployment of the semi-autobiographical mode "is the thing to catch the conscience" of the white invaders. This statement is a variant of what Hamlet says in the play named after him.

CHAPTER TWO

True Country: A Critical Insight

Kim Scott begins his novel *True Country* with a welcome note from an omniscient Aboriginal narrator to a certain “you,” who could be either the reader or the main protagonist, Billy. It is an invitation to Billy and us as readers to enter into the stories of the townspeople, to interweave our lives with the diverse and sometimes conflicting lives of the characters in the novel. The narrator presents a panoramic view of Australia with its glorious past and beauty adorned with “river ... sea ... creek, rock, hill, waterfall ... bush tucker: apple, potato, sugarbag, bush turkey, kangaroo, barramundi, dugong, turtle ... every kind. Sweet mangoes and coconuts too.”¹ But this description is an ironic comment on the changes that have taken place by briefly summing up the present outlay of the country as mechanical with store, school for kids and a mission for the Aboriginal community. From a sense of freedom, openness and a harmonious co-existence between man and other creatures of nature there is now a sense of enclosure, confinement, regimentation and loss of pristine life and culture.

The novel is set in a small, remote mission community of Karnama, which in reality is an image of the Kimberley region in North-Western Australia.² Billy is a mixed-caste and fairly light-skinned, which could easily pass him off for a White. His upbringing and acquired cultural orientation and thinking have, in many respects, been Eurocentric. However, he opts to come to Karnama to explore and relate to his Aboriginal heritage in order to acquire a more lucid understanding of his people and help them create a better future out of the wreckage, which is the recent history of the Aboriginal people. But what he finds in Karnama is a community acutely poverty-stricken, on the brink of disintegrating and barely surviving on government handouts. It is a community so much devastated by alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, racism

¹ Scott, *True Country* 13.

² Scott, author's note, *True Country* 8.

and displacement that it has become indifferent to its traditional beliefs and practices. Scott very discreetly portrays the litanies of social, economic and cultural setback of the Aborigines in this mission-dominated community. Such problems stereotype the Natives and seem to legitimise the racial smugness of the white community to which Billy initially belongs.

Being a mixed-caste Aborigine and having lived in urban centres, coming back to Karnama should have been a homecoming for Billy, but there is a vague feeling of being lost, displaced, of not feeling Aboriginal. Mixed-caste Aborigines, robbed of their past, language, religion, culture and tradition, have been assimilated into the Western lifestyle. What is left of the past is a smattering of a few words or what Billy calls “this and that.” But by piecing together “this” and “that,” they could recover something of the past. As he says:

But there’s something there, that’s what I reckon. Should we try and put it all together and believe in it? Or try and rediscover things, like that Renaissance thing. Do like they say Walanguh could, you know sing for this new world.³

Re-asserting their lost identity has become the prime focus for the mixed-caste Aborigines. It may prove to be a Herculean task for them to show the world who they really are and what their ancestors were like. They are lost even among themselves. Since they have been dispossessed of their own land and as a result of deracination, how can they tell others what went wrong with their world? But Kim Scott makes a point that if they do not tell the world what went wrong, then “we have to listen to them, be silent, watch their visions, feel our earth vibrate as they hammer it with thick ankles and well-shod feet, probe and jackhammer drill.”⁴ In short, submit themselves to further humiliation, degradation and exploitation at the hands of the marauding colonizer.

³ Scott, *True Country* 82.

⁴ Scott, *True Country* 83.

Many of the Natives who had faced the gruesome phase of the Stolen Generations have been deprived of their voice. But people are now trying to collect stories with the entire community contributing and preserving them. Unlike Billy, who could not collect information about his genealogy and his cultural past from his grandmother and father who were the only connecting link between the past and the present, the present Indigenous generations are coming forward and telling their stories, talking about their experiences to help create their true identity or as Scott, as the narrator, states that:

... he's doing with Fatima, Sebastian, Samson what he could have with her (grandmother), and even with his father but that was too long ago and he didn't think then.

So Billy is doing with us now, and Gabriella too. We might be all writing together, really.⁵

Their history, therefore, is to be based on collective lived experience of the community – it is an experience shared in common by the Natives in different parts of Australia, giving their narrative a high degree of credibility and authenticity. That apart, the act of telling and sharing their stories creates a feeling of bonding and empowerment in the sense that they are coming together in a common cause to recover and preserve their past and also to give a lie to history as fabricated by white historians. John Fiedler in his essay “Country and Connections: An Overview of the Writing of Kim Scott” goes on to suggest that Kim Scott’s first novel, *True Country*, uses the distinct Aboriginal mode of storytelling by adopting the collective narrative structure which serves to “empower ... tellers and listeners.”⁶

In spite of the sense of some part of him belonging to the indigenous group, Kim Scott shows that Billy is not completely at ease to mingle with and be one like them as he has been brought up as a White man and almost fully assimilated into White ways of

⁵ Scott, *True Country* 85.

⁶ John Fielder, “Country and Connections: An Overview of the Writing of Kim Scott,” *Altitude*, 2006, Curtin University of Technology, 20 June 2007 <<http://www.api-network.com/cgi-bin/altitude21c/fly?page=Issue6&n=1>>.

thinking and feeling. At one point in the novel, Billy says “I’m a white boy. I am a good white boy, safe. But this hurts.”⁷ What hurts him is the kind of life the Natives are living – making no attempt to pull themselves out of the grim slough of sadness, self-pity and a feeling of helplessness. Or does he feel hurt because there is a part in him which is White and which blames the Natives for what they are doing and experiencing? Being part White and part Black, he is bound to experience conflicting feelings. Though he sometimes displays the patronizing attitude of the Whites towards the Natives, he is not totally comfortable with his perception of being “a white boy” as he knows that Aboriginal blood courses in his veins. That is why he is able to connect himself with the land and its people. The conflict in Billy is well established – he is not comfortable with being White and he has difficulty in making a transition to becoming Native. With these two conflicting sides constantly dwelling in his mind, he makes a statement that “Well, not black. Or dark brown, or purple-black, or coffee coloured, or black-brown. Maybe tan. But what is this? We are all different. I am not the same.”⁸ He is conscious of the shades of colour the Natives have by virtue of cross-fertilisation with the Whites. This has resulted in the obliteration of their true identity, resulting in emphatic assertion “I am not the same.” This part echoes the lines from Wole Soyinka’s poem “Telephone Conversation” (1962) in which the Nigerian poet cites an instance of racial discrimination. In the poem, the poet is in search of an apartment but because of the colour of his skin he finds it difficult to get a desirable place without being subjected to colour discrimination. He has a telephone conversation with a landlady but the moment she gets to know that he is a Black fellow, she asks him with forced politeness, “ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?” Unable to grasp her implication or perhaps incensed by her racial implications, the poet goes on to confirm her meaning:

“You mean--like plain or milk chocolate?”
Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,
I chose. “West African sepia”-- and as afterthought,

⁷ Scott, *True Country* 160.

⁸ Scott, *True Country* 165.

"Down in my passport." Silence for spectroscopic
 Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent
 Hard on the mouthpiece. "WHAT'S THAT?" conceding
 "DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS." "Like brunette."
 "THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?" "Not altogether.
 Facially, I am brunette, but, madam, you should see
 The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet
 Are a peroxide blond. Friction, caused--
 Foolishly, madam--by sitting down, has turned
 My bottom raven black..."⁹

"Telephone Conversation" seriously makes one to question the racial issue between the Whites and the Blacks and the practice of colour bar. This poem was written in 1962 with the poet trying to highlight the racial discrimination that one faced during those times. But the same issue is still continuing in this age and the echo of colour bar is again seen in Kim Scott's *True Country*. How long will it continue and where is it going to end?

Billy confesses that "even if I want it, I do not feel like all of them others, not just because we're Aboriginal"¹⁰ This statement presents us a dilemma arising out of a conflict born out of nurture and nature. Being brought up (nurture) on White values he feels distanced from his brethren (Aboriginal people), but being part Aboriginal the call of racial ties (nature) beckons him to identify himself with his people and make a united stand along with them and assert their identity and establish their belonging:

gotta be the same so's we can make people remember that we belong here.
 And we got something to tell. Here first. For a long time. This whole big
 Australia land binds us. And we fragments of a great ... A Dreamt time. A

⁹ Wole Soyinka, "Telephone Conversation," *Reading and Writing from Literature*, ed. John E. Schwiebert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) 2001.

¹⁰ Scott, *True Country* 167.

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maybe rented time. A time the fabric of which is torn and rent and now not holding together, like a torn flag fluttering.¹¹

They are the original inhabitants and their inhabitation in Australia goes back to over forty thousand years. The fabric of their existence is woven out of their myths and legends. But unfortunately that fabric was torn by the Whites and they have become tenants in a land which really belongs to them. They are “like a torn flag fluttering” – not with pride, but helplessly tossed about in which ever direction the White wind blows. But they must stand united and “make people remember that we belong here.”

Kim Scott’s *True Country* develops a multiple voice narrative technique. The narrator’s own distinctive voice jostles for space with the voices of other characters. There is a plurality of unmerged and independent voices and consciousnesses. This plurality breaks the static, monolithic models of cultural expression and provides a diversity of voices that convey a shared heritage. *True Country* represents collective story telling, and that is the only way they can piece “this” and “that” together of their past and arrive at the whole of their history.

The first voice is that of the protagonist, Billy, who is in search of his Aboriginal identity and is trying to bridge a link between his fostered western identity and that of his genealogical Aboriginality. Kim Scott frequently and abruptly inserts an Aboriginal voice as a secondary narrator in the novel. This technique makes the reader feel that Kim Scott is probably trying to present Billy in two frames – one which is affiliated to the western culture and the other which is a part of the Aboriginal culture. In some parts of the novel, the Aboriginal narrative voice can be described as a representation of Billy’s inner voice which constantly reminds him of his roots. The natives believe that he is the man cut out for documenting their stories for the younger generations who have lost themselves in watching “videos all through the night, and recit[ing] lines of dialogue, role-playing with one another”¹² and also in attempting to be the gardiya (Whites) “who read stories of

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Scott, *True Country* 171.

sophisticated and ruthless people, or histories peopled by heroes.”¹³ He painfully reflects upon how their culture is being eroded and destroyed by the Whites. Instead of being fostered on their own stories (which at once regale and preserve the past), the Aboriginal people have got hooked on to videos which chiefly feature western culture (White American/Australian and European cultural legends and heroes) and recite snatches of lines from these movies and ape these celluloid heroes rather than being in constant touch with real events and personalities of their glorious past. These movies are successfully weaning them away from their culture, language and everything sacred to Aboriginal heritage. Some such thing has also happened in Canada where American movies have had a great impact on the lives of the half breeds. Drew Hayden Taylor in his play *Someday* draws attention to how Anne Wabung grew up watching movies like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*. In fact, immediately after her wedding she went to a cinema with her husband. In short, the Aboriginal experience in both Australia and Canada seems to run a parallel course. For example, alcohol has been the bane of both the communities.

The second narrator in the novel can be taken as a collective voice of the Aborigines. Unlike the western style of narration which lays more emphasis on individualistic narrative technique, Kim Scott employs a collective Aboriginal voice which presents a joint perspective. Hence, this communal persona overshadows the western form of individualism.¹⁴

Kim Scott draws attention to numerous differences between the Whites and the Blacks and how these differences make the blacks an easy target of ridicule, reproach and condemnation. The Aborigines believe in an egalitarian society and hence a strong feeling for communal integrity is instinctively upheld by them. Sharing materials that are essential for livelihood with the whole community is something that is commonly practised by them. But for the Whites, who believe in individualism rather than in communalism, such mass sharing is unacceptable and should a Native enter their property it would be termed as “trespassing,” and should a Native take away what he/she

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Richard Pascast. “Singing Our Place Little Bit New: Aboriginal Narrativity and Nation Building,” *Critique* 46.1 (2004): 4.

needs, then it would be termed as “poaching” and, therefore, totally against the Natives’ practice of sharing. In the novel, Liz, Billy’s wife, is quite shocked to see the children ransacking their house and using all their things without their permission. She starts reprimanding them by saying “You just can’t go into people’s house like this you know.”¹⁵ But Beatrice, a little girl, calmly replies, “We always do, with our houses.”¹⁶ These children see no difference whether it be their house or someone else’s. Everything appears to them as property that belongs to the community as a whole. Differences in thoughts and cultures do lead to a misunderstanding and the whole issue of animosity begins from here.

Kim Scott also draws attention to the ugly aspect of inequity in every White-Black conflict. Fending for survival in White-dominated society has not been an easy task for the Natives. They have to stay out of trouble, but once caught, it is tough for the Aborigines to save themselves from injustice meted out to them by the ruling White authorities. However, if the offending party is a White Australian then he/she can easily get away with mild or no legal punishment at all. The author talks about this issue through two incidents. Once Alphonse, extremely frustrated with the White authorities, breaks into the community office and messes it up by destroying the chairs and desks. On being caught, he is kept in detention for months for causing destruction to public property. But in another case, Franny, a Black boy, is beaten to death by two White men for no reason. The only thing they found wrong with him was that he was a black Aborigine. Scott describes the scene in a simple but telling manner, highlighting the sadistic delight of the two white men:

Oh, he was black! Aborigine! They hit him, kicked him, punched him. He was like a bag, he didn't fight back. Groaned. Maybe they enjoyed feeling their fists and feet striking his flesh.¹⁷

¹⁵ Scott, *True Country*: 149.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Scott, *True Country*: 203.

It is an unequal contest in which the little black boy has no chance of defending himself against the unprovoked violence of these marauding Whites. The passage with auditory and visual images is able to recreate the scene of violence. The boy is no more than a punching bag for them and it is with sadistic delight that they hit and kick him. The alliterative words (fricatives) like “feeling,” “fists,” “feet” and “flesh” tellingly piece together the horror of unprovoked assault. The boy does not fight back because he is only a boy (too frightened to even run away) and had he done so he would have been accused of provocation. Such atrocities are evidence of how the dice is heavily loaded against the Natives everywhere in Australia. That the legal code is constantly breached is suggested by the fact that the offence of the two men is overlooked and they are set free by the court the very same day. In matters of delivering justice to its people, the Law of the land is against the Natives. They are helpless, their voices silenced and their wings clipped. Scott puts it very plainly:

... nowadays we follow the white law, you know. They wanted us to follow the white law and we did that.... One time it was different, for us and this land. We had ones that could fix things, and could fly, disappear, punish.¹⁸

Justice in the past was swift and even-handed as the elders knew how to go about it. Now, the Natives are brought under the White law which dispenses judgment bearing in mind the colour of the skin. Before the arrival of the Whites, the Natives “had the ones that could fix things,” and punish the guilty. But in White Australia to be Black is to be guilty. The Aborigines are trapped in a no win situation. They are caught between their rich past and the ugly present. In a sense, they have been devitalized. What could have been easily and impartially done in the hoary past is no longer possible now. The Aboriginal culture is slowly dying and White man’s ways are a poor substitute for it. A natural way of living has given way to one that has been enforced upon them.

¹⁸ Scott, *True Country* 205-6.

The Whites' skepticism about the Aboriginal religious beliefs is also worth mentioning. Sir James Frazer, a leading anthropologist of the latter half of the nineteenth century, regarded the Australian Aborigines as lacking religion but possessing a belief-system based on "magic."¹⁹ However, there are others who believe that Aboriginal beliefs constitute a religion because "Aboriginal system of beliefs provides answers to the great universal religious questions of humankind, the questions about origins, meaning, purpose and destiny."²⁰

Religion, according to the Aborigines, does not only just believe in Spiritual Being/Beings. The concept of religion spans across many ideas, beliefs and practices. Rituals, ceremonies, belief in supernatural powers and magic are all a part of Aboriginal spirituality and religion.²¹ They believe that their Spiritual/Ancestral Beings, who created their land during the Dreamtime,²² are eternal and connect the past with the present and the future. These Spiritual Beings emerged from the earth, sky or sea and journeyed across the land, creating its form and all living things. Some transformed themselves from human to animal form or other animate/inanimate object and back again. They are believed to exist in the human beings, animals, plants, landscape features and phenomena such as wind and fire. Every human being is associated with a totem – an essential aspect of their existence. Josephine Flood, a famous Australian archaeologist, defines totemism as "the religious system in which people are identified with a particular animal, plant or natural feature, which, like themselves, in the Dreamtime was endowed with life essence by the creation ancestors."²³ The totem thus represents the person and can be used to refer to that person. A totem symbol can also be used in artistic representations and magical rituals to refer to a person with that totem.

¹⁹ Josephine Flood, *The Original Australians: Story of The Aboriginal People* (NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2006) 135.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ David Morgan-Mar, "Australian Aboriginal Magic," *Pyramid*, 7 Nov. 2003, Steve Jackson Games, 7 May 2008 <<http://www.sjgames.com/pyramid/sample.html?id=4291>>.

²² The Dreaming relates to a period from the origin of the universe to a time before living memory or experience – a time of Creator Ancestors and Supernatural Beings. This time is also called the Dreamtime tells the journey and the actions of Ancestral Beings who created the natural world. It is infinite and links the past with the present to determine the future. "Dreaming and the Dreamtime," *Aboriginal Art Online*, 2001, Aboriginal Art Online Pty Ltd., 13 June 2008 <<http://www.aboriginalartonline.com/culture/dreaming.php>>.

²³ Josephine Flood, *Archaeology of the Dreamtime* (Sydney: Collins, 1983) 241.

Australian Aborigines traditionally believe that all of their people possess some magical powers.²⁴ Propagating the beliefs in supernatural powers and mythical magic are a way of nurturing the connection between them and their Ancestral Beings. The early humankind were believed to have interacted with these Ancestral Beings; these Spiritual Beings gave specific languages to each of the different indigenous groups and also implemented the “Law” which advocates to maintain correct social and religious practices. They are believed to be the source of the conception spirits that initiate pregnancy, their inherent power being released through rituals and ceremonies to ensure health, growth and to maintain and increase food supplies.²⁵ Jane Resture in her article “Australian Aborigines and Their Culture” writes that:

Living men, it was supposed, could keep in touch with them, draw on their magical power, and make sure that their country maintained the fertile pattern given it in the Dreamtime, by faithfully following the teachings of the ancestors and re-enacting their ceremonies and rites.²⁶

The traditional rites for the dead are correctly followed according to strict customs and are quite complicated. Some of these are described by Deborah Mailman in *The 7 Stages of Grieving*. The rituals last for weeks and mentioning the name of the deceased person during this period is prohibited. These are to “safeguard the living from the spirit’s anger, to avenge the deceased and to ensure the safe return of the dead person’s spirit by way of the sky, a waterhole or an offshore island to the spirit home or totemic centre.”²⁷

Kim Scott shows in *True Country* that the indigenous still uphold these beliefs in the spirits and ceremonies such as the rituals for the death to evade evil consequences.

²⁴ Morgan-Mar.

²⁵ Flood, *The Original Australians: Story of the Aboriginal People* 136.

²⁶ Jane Resture, *Australia: Aboriginal Anthropology*, 2008, Jane Resture, 8 May 2008 <http://www.janesoceania.com/australian_aboriginal_anthropology/index1.htm>.

²⁷ Flood, *Archaeology of the Dreamtime* 240.

Beatrice, who did not perform the required rites at the funeral of the wise old man Walanguh, was being “sung” (a bone-pointing²⁸ ritual).

Sharp things moved inside her body, through her blood, stabbing inside her foot, shoulder, stomach, head.

Snakes winked at her, tongues flickering before slipping behind doors, into briefcases and boxes.

Faces changed as she spoke to them. She couldn't trust. Faces ever changed from human to animal. Limbs grew out of walls, pockets, clipboards. Smiles held knives in their teeth....²⁹

With modern medical treatment in hospitals failing to cure the girl, the elders of the community performed a ritual as an antidote to the bone-pointing sorcery. “They fixed her up. So there are other ways and other brains too, even if they may be going away, dying these days.”³⁰ This illustrates the practice of magic that has been continuing since the creation of men in the Aboriginal land by their Spiritual Creators. Any violation of the social law as implemented by the Ancestors was severely punished.

Why is it that the indigenous practice of/belief in magic is termed as “Black Magic” by outsiders? Does it simply mean magic of the Blacks or are they referring to it as a practice of black magic? Unfamiliar circumstances/surroundings can make one to draw conclusions that may widely differ from the actuality. Myths are an important component of the Aboriginal culture. Right from the belief of the Ancestral Beings creating the land of the Aborigines, mythical stories and possessing magical power have always been a main ingredient of the Aboriginal tradition. Scott refers to this mystical side of the Aboriginal culture in *True Country* by constantly filling the semi-autobiographical novel with characters, who have immense wisdom and possess age-old

²⁸ Bone-pointing was a psychological weapon practised by native sorcerers and other seniors. Pointing the bone was believed to cause evil force to enter the victim's body and extract the life essence, which flowed back into the bone and was captured in the resin. Flood, *The Original Australians: Story of the Aboriginal People* 144.

²⁹ Scott, *True Country* 185.

³⁰ Scott, *True Country* 186.

magical powers. These characters could change to any form when required to perform their duties. For instance, in the section "Milton Sees," he introduces an old character who could change himself into a snake. This person thanked Milton for not killing him the previous night when he was in the form of a snake. "He didn't know what he was saying. Maybe he was joking. But then he saw the man's eyes. They were like the snake."³¹ We, as outsiders to the culture, may ask if it is just a myth or hallucination, but for those who are governed by the rules and law of the ancestral land, it takes a lot of wisdom, knowledge and experience to execute their magical powers. And it is a practice that the indigenous people hold as sacred to their existence and it is this that serves as a bridge that connects them to their ancestors and their inherited culture. Representing a collective Aboriginal voice, Kim Scott emphasizes in one of the sections called "Visitors in Great White Boats" that "... this is a true story this one, this is a true story again. This mob here can tell you. Same words again.... Listen, we tell no lies to you. Not ever."³² "Supernatural" elements still flourish in the Aboriginal society alongside an awareness of the dominant white society's sceptical attitude.

Contrary to what the West calls "supernatural" phenomenon, which is beyond the realm of realism, this paranormal practice is quite a commonplace in the Aboriginal culture. It does not imply any illusionary fantasy but the truth which is beyond the grasp of scientific reasoning. Australian Indigenous writer Mudrooroo Narogin refers to it as the "Maban Reality":

characterized by a firm grounding to the reality of the earth or country, together with an acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality.³³

In *Writing From the Fringe*, Mudrooroo draws attention to the fact that "Aboriginal reality is different from white reality in that it is an expanded reality akin to

³¹ Scott, *True Country* 132.

³² Scott, *True Country* 145.

³³ Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997) 97.

the dreaming life ... Songs and rituals are not brain-made, but are imparted in dreams. They in effect are passed on." He relates this method of composing to "European surrealism which sought inspiration from the unconsciousness." Aboriginal writers may use "surrealistic technique to get at the very underlying stuff of aboriginality residing in the condensed and concentrated obsessions of the unconscious, or the individual dreaming."³⁴

Such differences in religious beliefs and cultural practices, which the Whites could not comprehend, made them look upon the Black Aborigines as a barbarous, uncultured and uncivilized community. Christian missionaries in Australia took the role of a saviour whose first and foremost duty was to "civilize" and convert the indigenous people to Christianity. The Aborigines were considered to be "savages" and "barbarians" and hence converting these "heathens" to religious Christians was believed to be a means of giving them salvation.³⁵ Hence, they saw indigenous people as children of God in need of salvation, education and training. However, the increase in the death toll of the Aborigines due to the diseases brought by the White fleets of people and the resistance shown by some of them towards conversion of religion made these Christian missionaries to assert that "the Aborigines were an unfit race, incapable of improvement, doomed to extinction."³⁶ During the 1860 Select Committee on Aborigines, the Bishop of Adelaide had been recorded to have said that:

... I do not think it inadvisable to Christianise them; for I would rather they died as Christians than drag out a miserable existence as heathens. I believe that the race will disappear either way...³⁷

³⁴ Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing From The Fringe: A Study Of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (Melbourne: Hyland House Publishing Pty Limited, 1990) 37.

³⁵ Stephen Garton, "Aboriginal History," *Australian Studies: A Survey*, ed. Walter, Jameo (London: OUP, 1989).

³⁶ Garton 191.

³⁷ Bruce Elder, "Racism – an Australian Tradition," *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians Since 1788* (Australia: New Holland Publishers Pty Ltd, 1988) 233.

This kind of attitude of the Christian missionaries is also evident in the novel. Kim Scott talks about the role of the missionaries in *Karnama*. They behave as though they are graciously helping the native Aborigines in constructing a “baptized” and “purified” nation. Father Paul proudly asserts that:

When the mission first came here they were dying out, in terms of numbers. It’s only in the last couple of decades that the numbers have started to increase. There’s a lot of children now.³⁸

According to them, they have played God in this “heathen” land and have saved the Aborigines by delivering redemption through conversion of religion. The indigenous way of living is unacceptable to them as it totally differs from their “civilized” culture. Alex (the Principal of the missionary school), therefore, feels that “As a people they can’t last long. They need to organize themselves. Set some sorts of goals. Face up to the way things have to be done nowadays.”³⁹ He believes that but for the intervention of the superior White race, the Aborigines would have dwindled away “like cockroaches.”⁴⁰ All of them feel that since they lack work culture, which is so much a part of European culture, the natives are unreliable as workers: “they’re none of them real top workers. Can’t rely on any of them really. Rather have a good time, and be with their mates, fishing, playing cards, talking.”⁴¹ The Aborigines are thus depicted as wastrels who lack all initiative to lead a useful balanced and organized domestic life. Little do the White colonizers realise that they have rendered them so by alienating them from their land and from their traditional crafts.

The stay in remote Aboriginal communities is not regarded as a very welcoming venture for the Christian missionaries and other official superintendents but for the wages and promotions that come with it. In the novel, Alex and other officials at a conference meeting discuss “earnestly about the difficulties of being a school Principal in remote

³⁸ Scott, *True Country* 24.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Scott, *True Country* 25.

⁴¹ Scott, *True Country* 26.

communities, and working with the community, with Aborigines.”⁴² Even Father Paul admits, “I’ll be glad to go on a sabbatical ... Look what we wanted to give these people, and now ... now what can you do, eh? I don’t like what I do, have to do...”⁴³ The element of service and sacrifice of personal comfort is sadly missing in the missionaries. They are disenchanted as they are provided with little comfort, but have they thought about the living conditions in which the Aborigines live? They blame the environment and the people for their own lack of commitment. They have got so much used to easy life that they can no longer endure challenges posed by the surrounding environment and the nature of work to be done on the mission. Working in remote places calls for a total surrender of the self. They now feel that the blacks are beyond salvation. Father Paul once snorted, “a microcosm of what? Our society? The whites here work hard. The Aborigines play cards, fight. What else? Incest, child molestation, violence, wife bashing. Alcoholism. Petrol sniffing. The church is dying.”⁴⁴ The church is dying because the missionaries lack the dedication required to do God’s work. They have not only converted them by force, but also divorced them from their traditional way of life.

In *True Country*, Kim Scott sketches the helplessness of the indigenous people whose ties with their roots, land, culture and languages were severed. In the mission, the Aboriginal children were forbidden from using their mother tongue and following their traditional ways of worship. Thus by making them forget their heritage and culture, the younger generations were made to feel alienated from their tribe. The children kept under the care of the missions and away from their families were later unable to communicate even with their own people. Fatima Nangimara was the first child born in the mission and when she was growing up she was forcibly removed from her family and years later when she came back to the mission, she ruefully confessed that the children “forgot [their] language. We talk in English. I couldn’t understand my mummy.”⁴⁵ Take away from one one’s language and culture and you would leave one disoriented and lost in one’s own milieu. If a child cannot understand her own mother, what kind of ties would

⁴² Scott, *True Country* 200.

⁴³ Scott, *True Country* 183.

⁴⁴ Scott, *True Country* 222.

⁴⁵ Scott, *True Country* 33.

she have with her family? The policies of the White colonizers hit at the very roots of emotional ties and social bonding among members of a family and tribe.

With the mission taking up the role of supervising over the needs and moral conduct of the indigenous people and the inculcation of Western education, the Aboriginal men's duty as the protector of their respective communities was gradually eroded and they were relegated to the periphery. Senior Aboriginal men's role as educators was diminished by Western education and with time their status in the society began to decline.⁴⁶ Christian missionaries, not only destroyed the native customs and beliefs, but also treated the aborigines as kids who did not have a mind of their own. Because of their paternalism, many of the aboriginal men are now mere impotent entities incapable of maintaining their own male status and, therefore, have also lost their self-respect.

Deprived of their role and social status in society, the Aborigines have sought refuge in patterns of social behaviour detrimental to the healthy growth of the community. Increasing addiction to alcohol and drugs has rendered them mere dregs of civilized society. *True Country* is filled with characters addicted to grog and petrol sniffing. Raphael, Alphonse and Milton, who represent the present generation, are drowned in this sea of self-exploitation/self-abuse. They cannot recognize between the rights and wrongs of moral conduct. They transgress all limits of social and domestic life – from harassing their wives to breaking into others' houses – just to avail and satisfy their thirst for alcohol, which has become the chief source of sorrow among the Aboriginal communities in Canada and the United States also. Beatrice Culleton, a half-caste Canadian writer, in her semi-autobiographical novel, *In Search of April Raintree*, describes the plight of the Metis people that parallels the experience of the aborigines in Australia. In her novel, she refers to the natives as “gutter creatures.” But who has made them so? The answer is not far to seek.

⁴⁶ Flood, *The Original Australians: Story of The Aboriginal People* 203.

Kim Scott focuses on the problems the Aboriginal males face today. They are enervated by the power of the white officials and by the white population in general. The dominance of the whites has emasculated the Aboriginal men to the extent that they do not mind wasting their lives doing nothing except drinking and playing cards. Such irresponsible attitude makes it easier for the white authorities to consider them unfit to run their household and the society at large, thus paving the way for the white Australians to subjugate them further. The anger and frustration, emanating from social marginalization, lead to domestic violence and the victims are the hapless wives who are doubly disadvantaged – sexually and physically abused by both the whites and the members of their only family. The men, under the influence of alcohol, take out on their spouses for negligence or tardiness in carrying out their orders. This is an experience shared by the African American women in the United States and the First Nations women in Canada. Scott cites Raphael as a living example of a wife basher. He gives a sound thrashing to his two wives whenever he finds faults with them. He mercilessly beats them up black and blue. On one occasion he ruthlessly beat Gloria with a huge club and dragged her “screaming from the shower by her hair. He slapped and hit her in front of his family; men, women, boys, girls, and all. She fell down on the ground in front of them naked and slippery wet and crying, and all the sand and little sticks stuck to her skin and tears.”⁴⁷

Wife-bashing does not occur only among the Aboriginal society; it is very common in every community the world over. Drunkenness, low self-esteem and rejection are the few common reasons which lead to this domestic violence. The male ego and power are asserted by beating their wives. Such acts of violence stereotype the Aborigines, but we do not realize that it happens in India too; it also exists in the African American families. Poverty, social persecution, and feeling of inferiority, issuing out of lack of proper vocation, lead to domestic violence.

The missionaries’ motto while saving these “heathen” souls was to spread Christianity and teach them the ways of God and the code of non-violence. But now they

⁴⁷ Scott, *True Country*: 242.

seem to forget their own principle and are responsible for creating confusion and chaos in their own mission. In one incident, the white officials in the mission shot a dog belonging to the Natives for trespassing into their premises. This gave rise to a big commotion among the missionaries and the natives. Is it a Christian act to shoot an animal for straying into one's property? Are there no other ways of chasing it away? But this is only an example of the senseless killings resorted to by the Whites. As missionaries one would expect them to show great tolerance and love towards both men and animals. Instead of helping the Aborigines stabilize their lives, educate and rehabilitate them, the missionaries quietly slip away into pastures of greater personal comfort. They feel that the natives are an insurmountable task to be "civilized," to be educated and trained in social graces.

With many changes brought into the Aboriginal communities by the European invaders and missionaries, the old ways have been altered. Those sacred arts and culture of the past are now used for commercial purposes; to make money, traditional and sacred dances such as corroboree are performed before white officials. These sacred ceremonies involving dance and music, which were originally meant for telling Dreamtime stories, are now performed to entertain the White visitors. These performances, hastily put together, are now devoid of all spiritual values. At best, they only serve to preserve in some shoddy way the age-old traditions and wisdom, but their spiritual import and significance are sadly absent. In the novel, Kim Scott shows how the reluctant children are forced to rehearse corroboree dances so as to perform them in front of the White guests. Their helplessness and inability to oppose the domineering gardiya (white) teachers is shown in one of the boys' remark who mockingly says, "We should do it, or we'll lose our culture."⁴⁸ The governing body persuades them to perform the dance in order to keep their culture going but the main driving force of organizing the whole performance is that they want to make money out of it. Native culture is commercialized and in a sense devalued.

⁴⁸ Scott, *True Country* 21.

Aboriginal life has become a commodity that sells. Different cultures and difference in physical appearances have rendered them quaint and exotic in the eyes of the outsiders. Consequently, making documentaries on these people have become a way of earning extra perks for adventurers and tourists. The Natives too know that “They show the film somewhere, good for them, eh? Maybe make some money, and laugh at us. We stupid blackfellas dance for them,”⁴⁹ but they are helpless as such ventures fetch them some money. Perhaps they are also beguiled into believing that they are getting the right kind of international exposure.

The younger generations of the Aborigines have now fallen prey to alcoholism, drug abuse and frittering away their time in useless and unproductive pursuits rather than occupying themselves in constructive works for the upliftment of their community. It was the European settlers who introduced alcohol to the Natives and now when these Natives have fallen prey to it, the White authorities keep blaming them for their irresponsible and wayward habits. Raphael is portrayed as a standing example of all those drunken Aborigines who are aggressive, unreliable and irresponsible towards their family, unleashing violence on their wives and children. The elders of the community disapprove of drinking among “the young ones” but they are helpless and do not know what to do about it as it is rampant among the young:

We don't like the grog, really. It's no good for us. We don't like it. Them young ones, they get drunk, they want to fight. They get a car and think they're like in a video. One day someone get killed, a kid maybe. They drunk they hit their wives, fight with other blokes, go after their rumbud. They don't listen.⁵⁰

The above observations makes it abundantly clear that liquor, apart from making them unruly, is an avenue of escape from the ugly realities of everyday existence. In their drunkenness they imitate the behaviour of the larger than life heroes in video movies.

⁴⁹ Scott, *True Country* 65.

⁵⁰ Scott, *True Country* 124.

The huge impact of the Western culture on the Aborigines has resulted in a wide generation gap between the elders of the community and the younger generations. Showing proper respect to the elders as well as to others according to their ancient traditions has faded. They take life for granted. Squandering away their time in merrymaking and other futile pursuits has had a bad influence on their kids who ape the lifestyle of the older boys and girls. Kim Scott draws attention to this in his novel, *True Country*: "They were too drunk. This was not work day, see and they been drinking long time.... Kids copied them, staggering and talking lazy like."⁵¹ Deslie in the novel is one such kid who has witnessed both his parents wasting their lives in drinking and this has left its evil impact on the young child. It has so influenced him/caught his fancy that when he grows up, he becomes a victim to all sorts of life endangering addictions.

With the death of the elders or to put it in a larger context, with the death of age-old cultural practices, the younger generations of Aborigines are losing all their traditional values. This death of a tradition sounds the death knell of a traditional way of living; it ushers in a change of attitude not conducive to the well-being of the community. Kim Scott portrays this wind of change in the case of Beatrice, a young girl who "did not take trouble to walk through smoke as the Law says"⁵² when the wise old man of their community, Walaguh, passed away. These young people are not bothered with such rituals and customs, the "people not believing, people not trusting, people not caring. All falling down. All asking to fall down. That's all we need to say for now."⁵³ The Aborigines are just falling apart, like devitalised creatures, as a result of being negligent of their traditional practices. Having lost all their cultural moorings, the Aborigines of Australia are merely drifting aimlessly. And for those men who spend their time in drinking, the community can only term them as "A modern man maybe. That's all we can say for now."⁵⁴ The term "modern" acquires the attributes of decadence, decay and destruction; there is nothing progressive about it. Indigenous Australians, who are concerned and worried about the gradual disintegration of community, helplessly watch

⁵¹ Scott, *True Country* 122.

⁵² Scott, *True Country* 148.

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

the ugly changes in the attitude of the people. They wait for someone to save them from the worse that could overtake them.

The Indigenous population has also witnessed the younger generation disregarding and flouting their cultural values governing man-woman relationship. There was a time when such inter-personal relationships were conducted with decorum and fineness. Kim Scott writes about this citing Alphonse and Araselli as the path-breakers. "They were not allowed to look or talk to one another.... But now? Now they live in one room, have a baby together, don't hardly talk to anybody else, don't worry about nobody."⁵⁵ The innocence and sacredness of the past have yielded to disrespect and couldn't-care-less attitude. Half-baked knowledge and uncertain scientific reasoning have led to moral laxity and deviation from a righteous path. A sense of purity and innocence experienced in a life lived in the midst of nature has given way to reckless aping of the worst in European culture that has devalued their existence as human beings: "In the old days, people thought you got a baby from dreaming, from spirits coming into you. Now people know different, the young ones could even stop having babies and still have fun if they wanted."⁵⁶ Sex is viewed as "fun" and not something sacred and divine. This sense of fun has led to a promiscuous life.

Scott raises a question whether "we learned anything from white man yet?"⁵⁷ By implication he seems to suggest that they have learned nothing worthwhile from the Whites though they have lost much of the earlier understanding of life. He stresses that "we don't like looking, and seeing it that way. We want to fly up again."⁵⁸ He believes that the indigenous people have to hold on to their traditional values, preserve their past and move ahead in life. This will further their prospects of developing a unique Aboriginal identity. He reminds them that "They can't forget our roots, they can't leave behind and go to the whiteman roots. That no good."⁵⁹ The focus is on their cultural roots and their true identity; they ought not to forget it. They must not adopt the alien culture

⁵⁵ Scott, *True Country* 178.

⁵⁶ Scott, *True Country* 177.

⁵⁷ Scott, *True Country* 124.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Scott, *True Country* 125.

brought by the Whites. The result of following the Western culture is evident from the habit of too much of alcohol which has resulted in a disorderly, casual and laid back life. This going back to the roots to rediscover oneself is encouraged by the philosophy of Negritude as advocated by Cesaire and Senghor, and much earlier by the founding fathers of Irish Dramatic Movement.

The younger generations of Aborigines have developed an allergy towards their culture and want to forget their past. All that they know is to play cards, drink grog, watch television all the time, play video games and imitate Hollywood heroes – in short, live in a world of make-believe. Children attend schools, play football or baseball, watch films and videos and learn to dance to rock and roll beat rather than to the rhythm of the traditional music. Guitars are heard more than the traditional musical instruments such as clap-sticks; rock and roll bands outnumber didgeridoos (traditional musical sounds produced by playing the musical stick which is also similarly known as didgeridoo); and hymns, western songs and nursery rhymes are more popular than traditional songs.⁶⁰ This is very well-illustrated in the novel when Billy narrates the kind of music the boys were rehearsing in the community hall.

They all play, or nearly all. They play all kinds; country and western, rock, some Warumpi Band, Coloured Stone, Archie Roach. All kinds.... They all smoking. Bruno he sings mostly. Milton, he bending over his guitar ... And Raphael like angry, angry hitting those drums too hard.⁵⁴

All these pursuits are signs of having assimilated the culture of the colonizer, but without being fully accepted into their community. The sad thing is that they have very nearly lost their own culture and the substitute that they have adopted will further alienate them. They will become increasingly a race of people without an identity. Music – country, western and rock – is used to release their frustrations: “And Raphael like angry, angry hitting those drums too hard.” Music must satisfy the soul, but the kind of music

⁶⁰ W. H. Edwards, *An Introduction to The Aboriginal Societies* (NSW: Social Science Press, 1988) 105.

they play is taking them farther away from their roots - intellectually, culturally and spiritually.

The loss of land to the Whites has left them homeless in every way and life in the mission is far from satisfactory. They have grown up watching all the wrong things and wrong people – from gardiya, grog to money, which have all spelt disaster for them. They should wake up to their cultural heritage and try to retain something of their pristine traditions; they should write down stories as narrated by their elders and pass them on to their children. For these reasons Scott is of the opinion that:

We can only do, we can only say. They can listen to us. They can believe us, what we say and what we tell them.

That's all we say. That's what we ask.

That's what Billy should write down and show those kids.⁶¹

The stress is on recovering the stories of the oral tradition, recording them and passing them on to the children and that is only way to preserve their past. Not to preserve these stories is to lose their traditions and culture, which in turn would mean losing their identity as a race, their sense of belonging to this place which has been inherited from their ancestral beings and which, unfortunately, has been usurped by the white invaders. The ever-pervading Aboriginal voice in the novel (which comes as the second narrator) affirms that – “It is not this reality that we are homesick for.”⁶² It is a larger metaphorical issue of where one belongs. They are homesick for the past, their culture; they are homesick for what they have lost to the Whites. They feel that “They (the Whites) too must go from this place because for sure they do not belong.”⁶³ It is this last idea that “they must go from this place” which is of cardinal importance. Their influence has been baneful. Australia does not belong to them and unless they leave, the evil which they brought with them would be detrimental to original inhabitants of the country.

⁶¹ Scott, *True Country* 125.

⁶² Scott, *True Country* 223.

⁶³ Scott, *True Country* 224.

Kim Scott further sketches an example of how the Aborigines are living with changing social values but also at times they tend to stick to their old tradition. This is illustrated by the diverse sexual relationships prevalent in today's aboriginal society. While Raphael represents the old tradition, Milton illustrates the modern attitude.

Most Australian Aboriginal societies were polygamous, and many older men had at least two wives. A man's status depended on the number of his wives he had.⁶⁴ Because of this custom of acquiring more than one spouse and having extra-marital affairs, Raphael's wife (Stella) has no quarrel with him for having an affair with Gloria. What is more, Stella does not mind Gloria staying along with the family. She is undoubtedly accepted into the household as another family member. On the other hand, when Milton begins an affair with Jasmine, his wife (Annie) has a big row with him; she is heard to be "banging the house"⁶⁵ when she learns about her husband's infidelity.

Before the invasion of the Europeans, Aboriginal women hardly had much voice to address their plight. Josephine Flood writes in her book *The Original Australian: Story of the Aboriginal People* that:

Girls were customarily promised as wives when they were babies or even beforehand to men old enough to be their fathers or even grandfathers; a ten-year gap was normal and sometimes it was twenty or even thirty years.

Wives were lent, shared and even exchanged; pre-marital and extra-marital sex with "sweethearts" was rife, and there were many "affairs" between wives of old men and young bachelors.⁶⁶

And if a woman was found to have flouted customary law or if charges were made against her fidelity or integrity, then

⁶⁴ Flood, *The Original Australians: Story of The Aboriginal People* 152.

⁶⁵ Scott, *True Country* 229.

⁶⁶ Flood, *The Original Australians: Story of The Aboriginal People* 154.

she was offered a choice of forfeiting her life or “if she is willing to go out into the bush, making herself available to all the local men for as long as they wish, the episode will be overlooked and no more will be said.”⁶⁷

Such atrocities against the womenfolk were very common among the different Aboriginal tribes of Australia. But with the advent of the Christian missionaries in the country, a whole new world opened up for the Aboriginal women who “now often dominate the family and have become community leaders, whereas many men have lost both status and self respect.”⁶⁸

In spite of this change, women till today can hardly make a change. Polygamy still exists in Aboriginal society.⁶⁹ Women may have earned a social standing by being the breadwinner of the family as in the case of Stella who works as a teacher in the mission but they are still controlled and over-powered by their husbands. In *True Country*, Scott shows that women being financially independent is just another way to meet men’s expenditure on wine and other useless activities – “Raphael lets Stella go to the school each day, and then straight home again; special quick on payday.”⁷⁰ Payday for her is heyday for him.

Witnessing all these different behavioural attitudes of the Aborigines, Billy could not initially relate himself to them, to the indigenous culture. But he gradually began to realize more of his strong connectivity with the Natives and responsibility towards them as he and Liz took over the role of guardians for looking after the mission. Every one of the White officials and the missionaries left one after another as they could no more persevere to stay and tolerate the indifference of the Natives. Billy doubted whether he could do justice in creating a documented history of the Aborigines. He felt that learning the Christian ways has devitalized him or is Kim Scott trying to point out the fact that all Aborigines have been devitalized by Christianity? Billy explains that being a Christian,

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Flood, *The Original Australians: Story of The Aboriginal People* 203.

⁶⁹ Flood, *The Original Australians: Story of The Aboriginal People* 152.

⁷⁰ Scott, *True Country* 237.

he – and the Aborigines at large – has lost the powers of their Ancestors. However, finally towards the end of the novel, Billy feels his connection to the Indigenous people and the culture as he reflects and sees all the immense vitality that is still present in the Aborigines and their tradition. He could see “Light distant, a circle of light at the end of a long tunnel. It was a throat. Quiet, warm, soft darkness. He was swallowed and within.”⁷¹ This metaphorically symbolizes that Billy has accepted his identity as an Aborigine. He now knows his mission in life and it is to recreate/propagate the past into the present and the future by adopting the language of their colonisers. He uses their language in such a way that it depicts the Aboriginal elements in its original form such as modulation of voice, incorporating song and dance into what he is transcribing for generations to come. The Aboriginal narrative voice in the novel examines that:

We agreed that English as people spoke here was good for talking, and that the old people told stories as well. But it wasn't so good for writing, maybe? There were not enough words, different words. You needed to hear the voice. And other people couldn't do that as well. You needed other things; like hands waving in space, and lips pointing, and drawing in the sand.⁷²

It has to be more like story telling rather than story writing. This is exactly what made him come to Karnama – to discover the Aboriginal individuality in him. He would be a beacon for others. The novel thus ends on an optimistic note.

⁷¹ Scott, *True Country* 253.

⁷² Scott, *True Country* 79.

CHAPTER THREE

Aboriginal Assimilation: Blackness to Whiteness

For a better comprehension of Chapter Four, which attempts a critical appraisal of Kim Scott's second phenomenal novel *Benang: From the Heart*, a clearer understanding of what Aboriginal Assimilation and the subsequent policy of the Stolen Generations, which started at the beginning of the twentieth century and lasted till the 1970s, is absolutely imperative. This chapter, therefore, will throw light on these two policies which successive governments in Australia encouraged with the sole purpose of permanently eliminating the "black tar" from the colonised country of the Aborigines.

What is meant by the term Assimilation? *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* defines "Assimilation" as:

the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society. Usually they are immigrants or hitherto isolated minorities who, through contact and participation in the larger culture, gradually give up most of their former culture traits and take on the new traits...¹

Before the 1940s, "assimilation" was widely known by the terms "absorption" and "merging." Although Assimilation found favour with the missionaries, some government officials and within protection regimes during the early part of the nineteenth century, it was only from the early twentieth century onwards that it came to be officially advocated. There were two main factors which contributed towards the development of the new policy of Assimilation in the late 1930s.

¹ "Assimilation," *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, 2008, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 20 June 2008 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9009936/assimilation>>.

Towards the end of 1930s, the colonial government of Australia began to amend their policy regarding the Natives from segregation (of the Black race from the mainstream racial group) to assimilation. It was A. P. Elkin, an Anglican clergyman and professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney, who was responsible for this shift of attitudes towards the Aborigines. He was a highly respected adviser to the government on Aboriginal policy from the mid 1930s to the 1960s.² Demographic reading gave way to this paradigm shift of favouring assimilation rather than the policy of separation and protection. In spite of the decline in the number of “full-blooded” aborigines indicated by the census count of 1939, there was a visible growth in the number of “half-caste” indigenous people.³ These statistics disheartened the white Australian government and rudely shattered its faith in being able to whitewash the country as the final solution to the “native problem” and, what is more, the half caste Aborigines were not completely ready to snap ties with their native culture.

The other chief factor which fostered and promoted the policy of merging the natives into the mainstream was the new trend of nationalism among the Settler Australians.⁴ Variegated forms of nationalism helped in constructing the government policies of assimilation and absorption from the late 1930s to the early 1960s.

Biological Assimilation

From its very inception, the idea of “absorption” was encouraged by the ideological belief of “uplifting” the natives through biological assimilation which meant the genetic dissolution of Aborigines into the white blood or simply the breeding out of colour. This is clearly outlined in the opening page of Kim Scott’s *Benang: From the*

² Peter H. Russell, *Recognizing Aboriginal Title: The Mabo Case and Indigenous Resistance to English-Settler Colonialism* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2005) 127.

³ By the 1940s, there was a subsequent increase of 10% in the Aboriginal population since 1921. Eleanor Bourke, “Australia’s First Peoples: Identity and Population,” *Aboriginal Australia: An Introductory Reader in Aboriginal Studies* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1994) 45.

⁴ Anthony Moran, “White Australia, Settler Nationalism and Aboriginal Assimilation,” *The Australian Journal of Politics and History* 51.2 (2005).

Heart where the author quotes a certain snippet from the newspaper *Daily News* on 3 October, 1933:

Black May Become White: Work of Elevating the Natives

The black will go white. It is exemplified in the quarter-castes, and by the gradual absorption of the native Australian black race by the white.

The position is analogous to that of a small stream of dirty water entering a larger clear stream. Eventually the colour of the smaller is lost.⁵

This short excerpt from the newspaper article of that year reveals the heavily accented racial and parochial tone of the European colonisers. It presents how the mindset of the then white community functioned in the multicultural nation where the maliciously handled indigenous people and the migrants hardly had any voice to address their predicament. As a well-calculated measure to solve the native problem which had been creating paranoid fears in the minds of the settlers who were concerned with the national homogeneity and future of the white community, the government officials formulated the plan to “uplift” and “elevate” the Aborigines by genetically assimilating the half-caste people into the mainstream through long term intermarriage of the races, thereby ultimately breeding out the negative “native traits.” It was obviously a long term programme entailing generations of trial.

In the early stages of the absorption policy, there was an assumption prevalent among the white settlers that what was left of the Aboriginal populace would die out eventually. The variously implemented policy of Aboriginal Protection Act across the country from the nineteenth century onwards was to segregate the minority black group from the Caucasian public by huddling them in various government camps, reserves and other settlement areas. The Aboriginal Protection Act of 1869 empowered members of the Protection Board in the colony of Victoria to undertake the custody and education of Aboriginal children and exercise a general supervision and care over all matters affecting

⁵ Scott, *Benang: From the Heart* 7.

the interests and welfare of the indigenous people.⁶ This also served as one of the earliest Acts that would later on lead to the adoption of frenzied legal practice of forceful child removal during the Stolen Generations of the twentieth century. This policy of segregation and protection was to avoid any possible proximity/contact with the blacks which, they believed, would create a nuisance to the white community, and also to educate and “elevate” them to a higher plain of humanity. However, since the settler Australians were strong upholders of Social Darwinism, they believed that the natives would eventually and naturally disappear, which was, however, proved wrong by the glaring increase in the number of half caste Aborigines by the third decade of the twentieth century. The white authority and its people could no longer ignore the growing population as they posed a threat to the racial homogeneity of the superior culture. The part-Aboriginal population was sending a wave of anger among the white community as they were to become the “in between” set of people between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups and thus created a setback to the focus on a unified white nation. Numerous amendments and reforms to earlier protection policy were passed and this led to the ideology of “Assimilation” during the 1930s. The theory of absorbing mixed-race Aborigines into the white community over a period of time and at the same time waiting for the “full-bloods” to disappear because of death, resulting in the much desired racial homogeneity of Australian society, found expression when, on 21 April 1937, the first ever conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities as its major resolution, under the general heading, “Destiny of the Race,” declared:

That this conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end.⁷

⁶ “The Laws: Western Australia,” *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission*, Dec. 2007, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 23 June 2008 <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/education/bth/download/laws/bth_lawsWA_8r.pdf>.

⁷ *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference Of Commonwealth And State Aboriginal Authorities* (Canberra: Commonwealth Government Printer, 1937) 3.

With this conference, the faith of the natives was sealed in reserves under government supervision and the “half-caste” children were to be absorbed into the white society by raising them according to white culture. The conference decided that “it is futile to expect these crossbreeds, no matter how light in colour, to successfully make a place for themselves in the civilised community without being equipped with the vocational knowledge and the respectable home background to overcome the handicap of racial prejudice and inferiority complex.”⁸ Furthermore, to discourage a potential racial problem, miscegenation was advocated as the sole means of eradicating the Aboriginal blood over a period of time. Mr. A. O. Neville, the influential Chief Protector of Western Australia, who remained in office from 1915-1949, had been a strong contender of this praxis. His only book *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* is a standing example of inhumane ideas to gradually eliminate an entire minority race through miscegenation. He was of the opinion that to encourage “half-bloods” to intermarry with either white men or other “mixed-bloods” (“octoroons,” “quadroons” et al.) would produce children with increasingly less “Aboriginal blood” through several generations. Thus any future “racial problem” could be avoided.⁹

Biological assimilation, though it had controversies and negative perception regarding the throwbacks from the interracial breeding, was considered the only way to materialise the White Australia concept and simultaneously was also seen as the solution for tackling the native problem. Nevertheless, genetic absorption did not last long as a result of the ideologies on anti-racism and decolonisation developed across the world right after the end of the Second World War.

Cultural Assimilation

The notion of “Cultural Assimilation,” which had long existed as an undercurrent, began to gain ground in the post-war period. *Wikipedia* defines Cultural assimilation as:

⁸ *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference Of Commonwealth And State Aboriginal Authorities* 8.

⁹ “The Laws: Western Australia.”

a process of integration whereby members of an ethno-cultural community (such as immigrants, or ethnic minorities) are “absorbed” into another, generally larger, community. This implies the loss of the characteristics of the absorbed group, such as language, customs, ethnicity and self-identity.¹⁰

As racism began to lose favour, cultural integrity was promoted as the source of unity and progress of the nation. It was believed that the practice of racial discrimination could be diluted by propagating the policy of cultural assimilation. A “Settler nationalism” was favoured as it advocated the denouncing of British identity and adopting an Australian way of life¹¹ which was based on the American lifestyle which adheres to the national ethos of the inalienable human rights of “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness” included in the United States Declaration of Independence. A thorough realisation of this philosophy was a very gradual process. The White Australia Policy which was advocating whiteness as the criteria for citizenship and the only method to safeguard the national homogeneity faded away little by little starting from the 1950s and was officially nullified by the Whitlam Government in 1973. And a more culturally-oriented form of settler nationalism was adopted to check the growth of ethnic and cultural differences which were the result of immense immigration incursion in the country. This meant that the overt dependency upon the white skin colour for a unified Australia was replaced by a less colour-coded Australian nationality,¹² which indicated that British culture was preserved and endorsed for the future of the nation. Efforts were made to progressively remove all references to race in legislation and other regulations dealing with Aborigines.

¹⁰ “Cultural Assimilation,” *Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopaedia*, 16 May 2008, Wikimedia Foundation, 20 June 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_assimilation>.

¹¹ Australian Way of Life is defined as a phrase derived from the “American Way of Life” and reflects a shift from British models of national identity to American ones, which emphasised common democratic beliefs and values. “The Oxford Companion to Australian History,” ed. Graeme Davison, et al. (Australia: Oxford University Press, 1998) 52.

¹² Moran.

The policy of cultural assimilation was based on the superiority of culture rather than that of race. Assimilationism assumed that migrants and Aborigines collectively would gratefully relinquish their respective cultures to adopt the values and norms of the dominant group. When policies of assimilation were introduced with an agenda for equality, it was a prerequisite that the prominent cultural difference of the “Other” would stop being distinctive. Availability of a chance “to fit in” to the white society as an equal (theoretically) also meant that they were required to conform to the white rules and regulations. This cultural assimilation required the Aborigines to attend the same manner of living as the white Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs.

Aborigines were dispersed from stations and reserves in order to promote in them efforts to assimilate; schemes for education, training and employment were introduced and Aboriginal families were allowed to reside in predominantly white suburban residential neighbourhoods. But the downside of this new era included policies of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their biological parents to be adopted by white families or to be brought up in children’s home; the natives were hard-pressed to give up their Aboriginal traditions and communal associations, and also to prove that they could earn a living for themselves in the cash so that they could be exempted from the Protection and Control Acts. A native was assessed as a perfectly assimilated aborigine by his/her ability to transcend various dichotomised barriers and make a complete crossover from black culture into white culture, from camp into town, swap black skin for white skin and move out of tradition into white history.

An important aspect of the assimilation policy was to oppose the growth of potential Aboriginal communities. This scattering of residents dismembered the coherence of Aboriginal communities and their hold on reserve lands. The closure of reserves gave the indigenous people a freedom from State paternalism, but it also resulted in the loss of familiar places, lifestyles and earlier employment. In the autobiographical writing *Don’t Take Your Love To Town*, author Ruby Langford explains about her

family's experience while living in the suburb Sadlier Green Valley in the chapter "Why We Didn't Assimilate":

These homes were the government's policy on integration. It meant putting us in among whites to see if we could live together, but because there were so few black families there in 1972 we felt isolated from our friends and our culture. All my neighbours were white, and there weren't many black kids at the school.

I found out that you were not supposed to create a nuisance or disturb any of the neighbours. You also weren't able to have anyone come and stay without permission from the Commission. It reminded me of the missions. The rule was useless in our culture, where survival often depended on being able to stay with friends and relatives.¹³

Not only did the Aboriginal people experience a sense of alienation from their friends and families, but they also found that their white neighbours were unwilling to accept them as equals. White neighbours' objections to their Aboriginal neighbours were ample testimony that assimilation was not a reciprocal commitment. Presence of aborigines was not acceptable; they practised forms of petty apartheid in excluding or marginalising aborigines and they were denied entry at public places.¹⁴

The aborigines had to follow stringent and inflexible rules and regulations in order to stay within the suburbs amongst the "cultured" white folks. The practice of dispersing Aboriginal families among the white residents not only imposed an indoctrination of culture upon the aborigines, it also contributed to their biological absorption. Ruby Langford elaborates this ugly picture of assimilation in the same chapter of her autobiographical work:

¹³ Ruby Langford, *Don't Take Your Love To Town* (Australia: Penguin Books, 1988) 174.

¹⁴ Peta Stephenson, "Beyond Black and White: Aborigines, Asian-Australians And the National Imagery." Ph.D. thesis, University of Melbourne, 2003.

The government policy of assimilation by absorption meant splitting up the Aboriginal communities, and I understand what this policy meant as I had four daughters and only one married an Aboriginal. My grandchildren were blond and blue- or hazel-eyed, and within two or three hundred years there won't be Aboriginals in suburbia. So as far as the government is concerned, assimilation by absorption is working well, and in the end there'll be no Aboriginal problem whatever.¹⁵

Under this policy of assimilation, the indigenous people were constantly under the supervision of the white government. The Aboriginal families were subjected to restrictions regarding who could stay and visit their houses and they were often inspected for levels of cleanliness they maintained. For upholding clean living conditions, Aboriginal women were often saddled with duties to conform to the idealised images of white womanhood. Narratives about "cleanliness" encompassed the assimilationist period and by the 1950s, white women were assigned a national task to provide a role model and educator to the Aboriginal group. Their mere presence as role models for the native women to ape simply helped in creating a racial difference. It, therefore, instituted/asserted the racial superiority of all white people and maintained a stable hierarchy of power in work and other interaction. There were numerous articles published in magazines like the *Dawn* which described assimilation as aiming at higher standards where training for assimilation begins at home.¹⁶ In one of these articles, learning motherly and wifely duties for fastening assimilation was described as a woman's responsibility:

The provision of so many clean, modern homes on Aboriginal Stations throughout the State [of NSW] opens up a new world for the aboriginal woman of today. She can now enjoy the same amenities, the same comforts, and the same pleasure as her white sister. From the dirt floor of a bark gunyah to the polished linoleum of a modern hygienic cottage, is a

¹⁵ Langford 176-77.

¹⁶ Francesca Bartlett, "Clean, White Girls: Assimilation and Women's Work," *Hecate* 25.1 (1999) 11.

big step for many Aboriginal women to take, a frightening step, perhaps, but with the patient and ever ready help of the Station Managers and Matrons, she will find it is not a difficult one after all. She will realise, that as the schools are educating her children to the cleaner and better ways of life, she must play her part by providing that home environment that is so necessary to the welfare of those children.¹⁷

References to domestic activities were used to manoeuvre the uncertain barriers of class, gender and race identity and were also used to indicate colonial control. The natives were to be raised in a new environment which would teach them to “abandon” their history, “remove” all traces of Aboriginality and to formulate a “clean,” “new” race. As such, implementation of domestic training also was a policy designed to create a single race in Australia. The urban white women engaged themselves in the act of nation building by teaching indigenous women how to appreciate the ritual of domestic life as seen through the Western eyes. Aborigines became objects for betterment that could be taught new ways which were in sharp contrast to the “unhealthy,” “degraded” and “stagnant” Aboriginality. Clichés like “Native Girls’ Fairy Palace” and “Native Mission to Melbourne Mansion”¹⁸ continue to create expression of acknowledging the white woman’s home as the zenith of civilisation. It also strengthened the idea of extending the notions of white Australian women’s public duty to render domestic education to the natives.

Neither the Aboriginal home nor any Aboriginal person was ever given a private space. Any officer of the Aboriginal Protection Board could come unannounced and had the legal rights to inspect an Aboriginal home for its degree of cleanliness. According to the level of cleanliness, the parenting standard of the Aborigines were also assessed. If they did not live up to the ideal standard as set by the white family norm, then the Aboriginal parents were declared as “unfit.” There prevailed a common belief that Aboriginal women did not look after their children well, that marriages were too early

¹⁷ Bartlett 11-17.

¹⁸ Bartlett 26.

and young Aboriginal women became pregnant in the most unpleasant circumstances. Hence their children, especially the mixed caste, were removed by the State to be raised in government institutes where the young ones would be taught to follow the western mannerisms and brought up as equals to whites.

This policy of removing Aboriginal children from their families started in around 1910 and lasted till the mid-1970s. This phase of forcibly removing the children, as it was in most of the cases, has been termed as the “Stolen Generations” in the Australian history. More than 50,000 Aboriginal children around the age of two to four, in most cases, were forcibly taken away from their families and placed in government run missions or welfare homes on the pretext of providing the children with a good education and living standard.¹⁹ Such acts were considered as a noble gesture by the whites for they believed they were saving the downtrodden people from the unrewarding and poor living conditions. Life in the institutions was thought to provide an environment through which the Aboriginal children would make a transition towards the more superior European culture. But being treated as an equal to the white men was far from reality. More than providing them with a good hygienic life, these stolen children were exploited and engaged as helpers in low grade domestic and menial works while some were taken as domestic servants for white families. This is amply demonstrated by Jane Harrison in her play *Stolen* which exclusively deals with the plight of the children in a Welfare Home. In “Cleaning Routine 2,” the children start to dance around singing to the tune of “We’re happy little Vegemites”:

Children: We’re training to be doctors – no
We’re training to be cooks – yes, yes
We’re training to be engineers – no
Reading all our books – no, no, no
We’re training to be cleaners – yes
And earn much less

¹⁹ “The Stolen Generation,” *eniar.org*, 2007, ENIAR, 1 July 2008 <<http://www.eniar.org/stolengenerations.html>>.

Because we love to work like slaves, we all adore to work like slaves. It
puts a rose in every cheek.

*(The children slap each other's faces)*²⁰

This song is sung to the tune of "We're Happy Little Vegemites," an advertising ditty of the 1950s that represented the Australian children as healthy Vegemite-eaters looking forward to a prosperous future. In the context *Stolen*, the song has ironic overtones as the children sing about the bleak future that awaits them. One must remember that life in the Welfare Homes was characterised by sexual and physical abuse and total neglect of the needs of the children.

These children, robbed of their traditional and family environment, were taught skills which helped them enter the white society as labourers and servants.²¹ However, there were also cases of some fortunate ones who were fostered by white parents and eventually had a good life. One such Aborigine, Maureen Young – a Gnadu Elder of Norseman, confirms about such positive experience in the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report on the Stolen Generation:

I was able to combine aboriginal traditional-way spirituality, as well as the Christian spirituality. And I believe I really had a balance. And that's what made me a leader today... And I was really thankful that I did have the white man education as well as the Aboriginal education.²²

A first hand account of life at the institutions as narrated by a woman named Millicent in *Bringing Them Home* highlights the fact that:

²⁰ Jane Harrison, *Stolen* (New South Wales: Currency Press Pty Ltd., 1998) 8.

²¹ Elder, "The Stolen Generation" 215.

²² Flood, "Assimilation," *The Original Australians: Story of the Aboriginal People* 227.

They tried to make us act like white kids but at the same time we had to give up our seat for a whitefella because an Aboriginal never sits down when a white person is present.²³

...

This time I was raped, bashed and slashed with a razor blade on both of my arms and legs because I would not stop struggling and screaming. The farmer and one of his workers raped me several times. I wanted to die...²⁴

It was, therefore, just a pretence and in reality, regardless of the “benefits” to justify the concepts behind the Stolen Generations, they were also offering – in addition to providing shelter, food and good education – rape, maltreatment, dislocation of family, violence and a total lack of respect for the human rights.

The main target of this illegal removal was the mixed caste Aboriginal children as the government believed that part-Aboriginals were more susceptible to assimilation than the “uncivilised” full-blooded ones. The aim of the policy was two-fold, both of which are now considered highly racist. One was the assimilationist policy of absorbing the mixed descent Aborigines into the European society and culture. The other was to ensure that these mixed caste Aborigines would inter-marry with the Caucasian race rather than the Aborigines so that the process of eliminating the blacks from the country could be hastened. This widespread desire amongst the whites to do away with the black community is clearly underscored in the Chief Protector of Western Australia, Mr. A. O. Neville’s speech at the first conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities in 1937:

Are we to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were any Aborigines in Australia?²⁵

²³ Elder, “The Stolen Generation” 212.

²⁴ Elder, “The Stolen Generation” 213.

²⁵ *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference Of Commonwealth And State Aboriginal Authorities* 11.

The Stolen Generations brought with it many ugly incidents and it is such a shame that the white government turned a blind eye to the maltreatment meted out to the Aborigines – be it the parents who were suffering emotional breakdown from the separation or their stolen children who were so badly affected by the removal policy that they considered themselves to be worthless in a white dominated society. The removal of Aboriginal children from their families meant cutting them off from their country, language and customs. Assimilationism was, therefore, just another means that functioned as a colonial regime that stripped away the black bits from Aborigines, dismantled their historical consciousness and practices.

Hence, for the white men's fantasy to maintain a national (white) homogeneity, which resulted mainly from the fear of being regarded as intruders in a land which had been occupied by the native inhabitants for some 40,000 years before the first white man landed on it, the indigenous Aboriginal people had to undergo countless number of ill-treatment at the hands of the colonisers. It began with mass genocide of the Aborigines and then towards Assimilation when these white folks soon realised that the few remaining survivors of the genocidal era were not going to easily dwindle away from the country. Assimilation, though it was introduced as a beneficial policy for the betterment of the natives, only resulted in creating a disappointment among them for they were not allowed (whether overtly or subtly expressed) to practice their Indigeneity in a land conquered by the whites by violence and chicanery.

CHAPTER FOUR

Benang: From the Heart – A Critical Attempt

Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* is quite different from his first novel *True Country* though both have shades of semi-autobiography in them. While *True Country* is about the author-narrator's search for his Aboriginality, *Benang* goes a step further and re-examines the history of the country during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the Stolen Generations and the White Australian Government's policy behind it to permanently wipe out the Blacks from the face of the country and finally the narrator's gradual assimilation into his Nyoongar identity. According to Lisa Slater's view, *Benang* is in fact "both a political critique and a reimagining of contemporary Australia. Scott intervenes and reconfigures dominant race relations."¹

"From the Heart," the subtitle of *Benang*, is explained at the very beginning of the novel where Harley (the I-speaker) is asked to "speak it from the heart."² His skin colour maybe white, but the part-black blood that courses through his heart cannot tell a lie. Deep down in his heart he knows that he is part aboriginal:

'You can always tell'
'You can't hide who you are'
'You feel it hear?'³

Apparently, he is all set to write the history of his family. In the process he makes the discovery of his Aboriginal identity and also unveils the gruesome past of his Nyoongar ancestors of four generations who had been victims of White men's policies.

¹ Lisa Slater, "Kim Scott's *Benang*: An Ethics of Uncertainty," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 4 (2005): 147-158 <<http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/issue/view/13>>.

² Scott, *Benang* 10.

³ *ibid.*

Benang, which Harley considers as a record of his “family history, the most local of histories”⁴ is in a wider sense a deconstruction of Australia’s documented history and a reconstruction of the unrecorded past seen from the perspectives of those who have suffered at the hands of the ruling white supremacy. He, very concisely, makes this clear in his statement that:

... it is not really me who sings, for although I touch the earth only once in my performance – leaving a single footprint in white sand and ash – through me we hear the rhythm of many feet pounding the earth, and the strong pulse of countless hearts beating.... Am bringing life.⁵

In the act of reconstructing the family history, he would find it easy to sing, in the manner of early story tellers, his ancestors, rather than write because “this language troubles”⁶ him as it “has a bad smell about it,”⁷ but he cannot help using it to tell his history. English is an alien language that cannot express the emotional, cultural and spiritual aspects of Aboriginal life that have been devastated since the arrival of the whites. It is a language that smells of death and destruction; the smell of lies and treachery; and the smell of guilt. It is a language that was used to deprive them of their voice. But, ironically enough, it is the only language he knows with which to hit back.

In his article “Strangers at Home,” Scott stresses this point on the use of the English language. He recounts that “the English language – yes, even ‘Australian English’ – carries ways of thinking which correspond awkwardly with the country we inhabit.”⁸ Even though English cannot provide the adequate words to describe themselves and their plights, it is – to a great extent – a way of writing back to the empire. With this acquired language, the colonized natives have now got a universally comprehensive voice

⁴ Scott, *Benang* 12.

⁵ Scott, *Benang* 9-10.

⁶ Scott, *Benang* 10.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Scott, “Strangers at Home.”

to dismantle the notions of essence and authenticity of the colonizers.⁹ Professor Santosh K. Sareen validates this point in his article “Self, Identity and Belonging: An Aboriginal Case” by emphasising the fact that Kim Scott uses the English language, which the settlers once used to maintain authority and leave the subaltern without a voice of their own, as a device for “a unique mode of resistance. He uses the hostile archival language back on itself, thereby deconstructing the ways of thinking implicit in that kind of language.”¹⁰ Scott inserts many phrases and instances recorded in archival documents to give authenticity to what he is trying to portray through his novel – to the muted history of the Aborigines.

The history that the narrator is going to present goes back a few generations, as “far back as my great-great-grandparents ... Fanny, Sandy One Mason, and their boy, Sandy Two.”¹¹ The moment he recalls these names, he thinks of the stench from the tank that assailed his nostrils. Was it a dead Kangaroo? No, “it was the body of a child. A boy.”¹² Nameless, illegitimate, abandoned and apparently fathered by a pioneer. This is certainly not the most laudable of beginnings for history. In short, he intends to write a history that has a chequered origin.

He chances upon this incident while attempting “to supplement Grandad’s research and my Uncles’ memoirs.”¹³ To authenticate his story he talks about how “Kylie Bay’s Board of Health had written to the Aborigines Department asking for funds for the disposal of the body of said child which, having been deposited within the town area by blacks, posed a hazard to town’s health.”¹⁴

⁹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in post-colonial literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁰ Santosh K. Sareen, “Self, Identity and Belonging: An Aboriginal Case,” *Australia and India Interconnections: Identity, Representation, Belonging*, ed. Santosh K Sareen (New Delhi: Mantra Books, 2006) 66.

¹¹ Scott, *Benang* 10.

¹² Scott, *Benang* 11.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

The irony is that it is the whites who brought diseases into Australia against which the Natives had no immunity and their numbers dwindled drastically. Harley at once feels a sense of kinship with the dead child and Fanny who had looked up discreetly and “sniffed the air.”¹⁵ He too experiences a sense of neglect, of having been abandoned – dumped like that boy. Anger, anxiety and betrayal overwhelm him. However, he sets himself on the right course by saying that this is not “a story of me – other than in the healing – but before me.”¹⁶ This statement points to a two-fold objective. The act of telling has a therapeutic effect – it heals. Although he claims that he intends to “write nothing more than a simple family history, the most local of histories. And to make certain things clear,”¹⁷ we realise that the history of one family in miniature represents the history of all families in the community as they share a common experience. In that sense, the particular becomes the universal and the act of telling is to set the record right, to “make certain things clear.” In the absence of there being any authentic account by white historians about what had happened to the Aborigines, it is imperative that these stories be told.

The opening chapter closes with the line “The first white man born,” which turns out to be one of the themes of the novel and how and under what circumstances he came to be born. This statement is a reference to the policy of assimilation, which aimed at destroying the identity, culture, language, religion and traditions of the aborigines. The idea was to make Australia white by genetically absorbing Aboriginal blood into white blood and thereby wiping out blackness. Though A. O. Neville would have us believe that his intention was quite honorable as through the policy of assimilation he wanted to ameliorate the natives: “As I see it, what we have to do is uplift and elevate these people to our own place.”¹⁸ However, this specious desire to “elevate” the Natives results in righteous rage as the White Australians’ firmly denied the Natives a place of recognition in the society. They were subjected to two centuries of physical tortures, spiritual and psychological trauma caused by being used as guinea pigs by the white authority to make

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Scott, *Benang* 12.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Scott, *Benang* 13.

them their equals and absorb them into the mainstream. The headline in the *Daily News*, 3 October 1933 “Black May Become White: Work of Elevating the Natives” starkly shows the then current fervour of eliminating the black race from a dominating white society.¹⁹

Interestingly enough, Scott appropriates excerpts from Neville’s 1947 work, *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* which, he admits, “was a continual – albeit perverse – source of inspiration”²⁰ and using these excerpts as his narrative cue, he demonstrates throughout the novel how the monstrous despotic act of the Protector affected the indigenous people. Scott’s use of intertextuality as a means to unmask facts and reality has kept his fictional narrative firmly grounded in harsh realities and effectively exposed A. O. Neville’s genocidal agenda.

“The first white man born” in the family is Harley who sees himself “poised with a boomerang, throwing it out,”²¹ almost suggesting that the skin may be white, but the racial instincts assert themselves in him. In a sense, therefore, he is also the representative of all the displaced part-Aborigines of the country.

Very early in the novel, Kim Scott appoints Harley as his anchor to break “the great Australian silence” which was primarily a phenomenon of the twentieth century and it was encouraged on a nationwide scale as the white Australian nationalism flourished. As historians focused on promoting the newly imagined Australian nation, they increasingly remained silent on the original Australians.²² W.E.H. Stanner has remarked in his Boyer Lecture “After the Dreaming” (1968) that the silence is “the story of the things we [have] unconsciously resolved not to discuss with them or treat with them about; the story, in short, of the unacknowledged relations between two racial groups.”²³ He had also added that it had not only been a historical silence but a silencing as well.

¹⁹ Scott, *Benang* 7. *Daily News*: “The black will go white. It is exemplified in the quarter-castes, and by the gradual absorption of the native Australian black race by the white.”

²⁰ Scott, acknowledgements, *Benang* 499.

²¹ Scott, *Benang* 14.

²² Atwood 2.

²³ WEH Stanner, *After the Dreaming: The 1968 Boyer Lecture* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1974).

The great Australian silence had excluded the other side of the story. For cultural regeneration, Scott knows that he has to speak of those events which are difficult to say and listen to, and Harley's documentation of his "local of histories" is a way to relive the atrocities the Aborigines have gone through in the past. Writing provides Harley the cue for asserting the rights and existence of his fellow Aborigines in a white-dominated society. Harley says that:

Raised to carry on one heritage and ignore another, I found myself wishing to reverse that upbringing, not only for the sake of my own children, but also for my ancestors, and for their children in turn. And therefore, inevitably, most especially, for myself.²⁴

Though raised as a white, Harley cannot ignore his black heritage. He feels the need to reverse the situation and that can only be done by slipping into the past and learning about his genealogy. Moreover, he is troubled by something he had heard from his father and the two girls he was friendly with and is now on the lookout for some evidence of it. One day he slips into his grandfather's room and finds "Certificates of birth, death, marriage; newspaper clippings, police reports; letters ... parish records; cemetery listings; books, photographs..."²⁵ – things that go in the making of history. He has a close look at photographs in which families are "grouped according to skin colour."²⁶ Some photographs have captions such as "*Full-blooded, half-caste (first cross), quadroon, octoroon.*"²⁷ It soon becomes clear to him that he is only "a fraction of what [he] might have been"²⁸ – that is aboriginal.

Apparently, his grandfather was engaged in some kind of research that entailed getting rid of blackness in the family over a period of few generations. A caption beneath his father's photograph read: "*Octoroon grandson (mother quarter caste [N0. 21], father*

²⁴ Scott, *Benang* 21.

²⁵ Scott, *Benang* 27.

²⁶ Scott, *Benang* 28.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

Scottish). *Freckles on his face are the only traces of colour apparent.*²⁹ Harley sees himself at the end of the long line of photographs and his grandfather's observation gives a clue to what he really was up to:

*Breeding Up. In the third or the fourth generation no sign of native origin is apparent ... after two or three generations the advance should be so great that families should be living like the rest of the community.*³⁰

As he scrutinizes the family trees or diagrams, he realises that each one ended with his name. The strip of paper sticking out of one of the books leads him to the line: *"The need for both biological and social absorption. Dilute the strain."*³¹ Through the process of dilution, his grandfather had finally had a grandchild that was for all appearances white. That is why the chapter is titled "success"³² and this success is related to the statement "The first white man born"³³ at the end of the opening chapter of the novel. Obviously careful selection of mating partners had taken place to arrive at this stage where blackness was virtually wiped out. And Harley succinctly describes his grandsire's effort as "Well, old man, fuck me white."³⁴ He is a product of a long and carefully meditated "process which [his] grandfather had brought to a conclusion."³⁵ His grandfather's experiments are a part of "the system used at the settlements and missions."³⁶ Miscegenation as a way of making Australia white was apparently carried out on large scale. In the Chapter titled "Mirrors," A. O. Neville outlines the process that smacks of disgust. He virtually plays the pimp in the act of ensuring a steady supply of native women to the white community:

Our policy is to send them into the white community, and if the girl comes back pregnant our rule is to keep her for two years. The child is then taken

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Scott, *Benang* 29.

³² Scott, *Benang* 25.

³³ Scott, *Benang* 12.

³⁴ Scott, *Benang* 29.

³⁵ Scott, *Benang* 30.

³⁶ *ibid.*

away from the mother and sometimes never sees her again. Thus these children grow up as whites, knowing nothing of their environment. At the expiration of the period of two years the mother goes back into service. So that it really doesn't matter if she has half a dozen children.³⁷

What Neville attempted on a large scale, Ernest Solomon Scat attempted at a personal level and probably chose to believe that it was a selfless task; so he would slip into that part of the verandah where the newest maid slept. "He wanted to make us in his own image, uplifting us to that."³⁸ In a god-like manner he wanted to populate Australia with the fruits of his seed. He wanted to make the natives look white. Every time a new child was born, in the manner of the wicked queen in the fairy tale, the question was posed "Who's the fairest of them all?" Obviously it was Harley, his grandson. He discarded all others, "Though my father, Tommy, was fair also,"³⁹ says Harley.

Harley becomes aware of the "historical place" he sprang from and decides to defeat his grandfather's designs by proving himself a failure – by trying to get back to his roots. During his grandfather's time there were only two races in Australia, black (aborigines) and white (Europeans), but now a new race has come into being – a mixture of both.

Since his grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat, has had a stroke, Harley is asked to go through the records in the library and complete the family history, the writing of which was begun by Scat senior himself. Each morning as Harley writes, several questions turn up in his mind: "What was it? A family history? A local history? An experiment? A fantasy?"⁴⁰ It is a family history highlighting the results of the experiments carried out by the elder Scat.

³⁷ Scott, *Benang* 159.

³⁸ Scott, *Benang* 160.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Scott, *Benang* 35.

These experiments had at heart the concept of Social Darwinism which was widespread among the White policy-makers and how they used it as a tool during the 1920s and 1930s to adopt a paternalistic attitude towards the indigenous group. The indigenous Australians were considered to have failed the process of evolution. According to Charles Darwin, a naturalist of the nineteenth century, society is ruled by the law of “the survival of the fittest.”⁴¹ The non-indigenous Australians were of the view that the natives were on the verge of extinction and those who had survived the cultural genocide of the nineteenth century were placed under the paternalistic care of the civilized white society.⁴² In *Benang*, A. O. Neville and Ernest Solomon Scat are presented as the prime representative figures of this era. According to them, the best way to handle the “Native problem” was to place the Aborigines at far-flung settlement camps to avoid contact with and complaints from the white settlers. Such measures allowed them to go to town only when they needed rations; they were constantly under the surveillance by the police and other local protectors and they were also a source of ready labour force when necessary. The white authorities regarded this method of segregation as a well-meaning help for the natives.

The Settlements give the natives a chance. They're a Child Race. It's our duty to train them for Useful work, and keep them from harm, from causing harm. They can be an embarrassment.⁴³

One is dismayed by such condescending attitude of the colonizers who gave themselves airs of superiority; they regarded themselves as the great pioneers of this “terra nullis”⁴⁴ with

pristine beaches; turquoise waters and white sand. Granite outcrops where the enterprising Mr. Mustle welcomed the whalers, sealers and other adventurers in the very earliest days of settlement.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Charles Darwin, *On the Origins of Species: By Means of Natural Selection* (London, 1859).

⁴² Mudrooroo, introduction, *Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka* 13.

⁴³ Scott, *Benang* 47.

⁴⁴ Garton, “Aboriginal History.” In 1788, the British government declared Australia to be uninhabited thereby implementing the principle of “terra nullis” which literally means no person's land.

They heralded themselves as the creators of this new found No-Man's-Land. Local histories maintain records of "those roles for daring pioneers, for explorers of new territory, for men who were innovative and adaptable, brave and proud."⁴⁶ However, the native Australians were proving to be a hindrance to their creation process. They were likened to weeds in a well-planned garden. To get rid of these unwanted people who marred the face of the country, the white policy-makers implemented many plans which they thought would finally erase the blacks from the map of Australia. Interracial breeding was one of the many plans they had hatched upon and the result was so tremendous that a survey showed the number of full-blooded Aborigines dwindling to a great extent by the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.⁴⁷ The mixed caste children born out of this interracial breeding were categorized according to their colour and privileges like being exempted from the Aboriginal Protection Act, 1905, were granted to those who were regarded as exceptionally white. Part-aboriginal natives surviving at the mercy of the white society had endless plights to go through in order to be accepted into the mainstream. Scott cites Jack Chatalong as an epitome of a fringe dweller. Being raised as a half-caste under the supervision of the white government, he was moulded in such a way as to make him forgo his aboriginal identity and accept the white culture which he regretted doing later in life. In his application to the Chief Protector of Aborigines for exemption from the Aboriginal Protection Act, he mentions that:

I am a half caste and I Don't mix up with the Blacks and I work Hard and Earn a living the same as a white man would ... I can Read and write But I have been barred from going Into a Pub and having a drink because I have got no permit...⁴⁸

However, in the eyes of the government these half-caste Aborigines were never an equal to the white men. According to them, raising them as whites was only a means

⁴⁵ Scott, *Benang* 26.

⁴⁶ Scott, *Benang* 121.

⁴⁷ Eleanor Bourke, "Australia's First Peoples: Identity and Population." *Aboriginal Australia: An Introductory Reader in Aboriginal Studies* 45.

⁴⁸ Scott, *Benang* 64.

of helping them to elevate them from their current embarrassing state of “savage” livelihood, of raising them from the level of “troublesome indigenous fauna, of vermin control, of eradication and slaughter; raise it to the level of animal husbandry.”⁴⁹ The tricky situation in which these half-castes were surviving was sympathetic as well as unimaginable. They were mentally so conditioned that they detested the black culture and their degrading way of survival and were not ready to go back to their native roots. Jack Chatalong refuses to perform a corroboree at the camp. “He wouldn’t do that stuff, couldn’t do it, it was strange to him.”⁵⁰ Scott also points out in *Benang* that some of the Aboriginal descendants had shown shame and self-hatred for being too dark and this led to their own eradication. On the other hand, the whites considered the half-castes as unfit to be absorbed into their society. For these half-castes, it was akin to living in a limbo – neither here nor there. The ramification of such humiliation and continuing betrayal left them without a voice. A gregarious young Jack, who did not know when to stop chattering, transformed himself into a silent lamb as he grew up under the hawk eyes of the white authority. He felt “like an instrument being played. But such a poor instrument because although he felt the humming alive within him, it was more like a struggle to breathe than articulated song.... Chatalong had been struck dumb.”⁵¹

Kim Scott gives a quick brief sketch of the living conditions of children at the settlement. The children were herded into trains and at some undisclosed destination the trains were disburdened of their human cargo. They were then rounded up and driven to the settlements “...like animals, really, but of course it was not for slaughter. For training? Yes, perhaps. Certainly it was for breeding, according to the strict principles of animal husbandry.”⁵² The lighter skinned ones were kept elsewhere.

The children were treated like animals and locked in a dormitory. They were mistreated very badly; a small mistake could land spittle on their face or be tied to leg of a desk or else came to class with a tonsured head and a sack as a dress. The kind of food

⁴⁹ Scott, *Benang* 76.

⁵⁰ Scott, *Benang* 101.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Scott, *Benang* 93.

they were fed included greasy soup with “eyeballs floating across ... and crusts of bread showed signs having already been gnawed by tiny mouths.”⁵³ But the white delegates who visited the settlement had a very different tale to tell. One of those delegates wrote in a certain church newsletter that:

A visit to the native settlement is always a joy to me. Any place where they are caring for the original inhabitants of Australia should receive the sympathetic support of all who have made this country their home.

... Delightful people with black skins were running about, and great was the excitement at the arrival of a visitor.

.....

What a blessing for the natives that they have got a sympathetic superintendent and self-sacrificing staff.

Segregation is the only thing for the Aborigines. But let their segregation be Christian, and the natives taught to be useful...⁵⁴

Such refusal to acknowledge the conflicts and mistreatment that the natives had to undergo under the supremacy of the white government in their own land is a part of “the great Australian silence.” This practice of refusing to acknowledge real facts developed into a national wide phenomenon of forgetfulness.⁵⁵

Scott, however, captures the dark history of Australia which has so far been considered better muted by not mentioning it in any documented historical record. He shows the two versions of history as seen by the whites and the other by the blacks who are at the receiving end. The few incidents of killing Aborigines in the novel represent a five-minute snapshot of the brutal massacres that took place in various parts of the country during the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. These massacres were a consequence of the resistance offered by the natives against the early

⁵³ Scott, *Benang* 94.

⁵⁴ Scott, *Benang* 95-96.

⁵⁵ Stanner 25.

white settlers.⁵⁶ *Benang* relives those moments in the history of Australia which are filled with atrocities and discrimination against the natives. Scott shows that the ugly acrimonious mass killing was all a game to the white men. There were “cracks of rifle shots” everywhere,

figures leaping to their feet, helping one another up, running. And there were voices calling, calling. People fell, were shot. Were shot. A woman running ... was flung to the ground ... other bodies hitting the ground, screams and shouting. Small voices too.⁵⁷

With auditory and visual images, Scott vividly evokes the scene of the slaughter of the innocent, helpless and defenseless Natives. There is panic all round – figures leaping, running, calling, shouting, helping and suddenly falling to the ground. There is a shower of bullets and no one is spared – not even women and children. “Small voices too” “were shot. Were shot.” It was a premeditated, surprise attack. So much for the peaceful occupation of Australia by the white settlers! They were actually licensed to kill as they were granted permits “From the police. To kill.”⁵⁸

The indigenous people were not regarded as humans. The colonisers wanted to savour the malicious thrill of exercising their power upon the poor, hapless people. Ernest Scat’s references have it that “all attempts at uprisings were frustrated in such a way as to leave no bitterness but just a quiet sense of mastery on the part of the white man, and a good lesson to the primitive mind.”⁵⁹ It never occurred to him that it is a primitive and barbaric mind that would delight in such violence.

Kim Scott adopts a non-linear narrative technique. He infuses many perspectives to create his historical accounts of Australia through four generations of the narrator’s ancestors. He suggests that for a narrative with multiple perspectives from his historical

⁵⁶ Elder, “Two Hundred Years Ago” 1-17.

⁵⁷ Scott, *Benang* 188.

⁵⁸ Scott, *Benang* 179.

⁵⁹ Scott, *Benang* 186.

characters, it is impossible not to employ a “shifting, snaking narrative.”⁶⁰ Subjectivity of the narration is blended with alternative stories and this, according to Lisa Slater in her article “Kim Scott’s *Benang*: An Ethics of Uncertainty,” makes his style of storytelling “rehearse the process of the self being open to and reconstituted by otherness” and conceives subjectivity as a shared event like language and storytelling.⁶¹

Benang records the past and the present through multiple perspectives as perceived by the narrator himself who stands for the present generation, his grand-uncles Jack Chatalong and William who represent the silent Black history of the Aborigines and Ernest Scat, A. O. Neville and other officials – the domineering white community whose works and ideas have contributed in shaping the White history of Australia. Half-caste Aboriginal children were constantly under the microscopic surveillance of the government. They were constantly scrutinized to make sure that they were absorbed into the white community and imbued their “civilized” way of living. For the purpose of “uplifting” these children, they were provided a chance to adapt to the European ways. White settlers were influenced by Charles Darwin’s theory on Social Darwinism and hence as a result of this, they began adopting methods to hasten the extinction of the native Australians. Ern Solomon Scat, inspired by A. O. Neville’s idea of cross-breeding to whitewash the nation, developed his scientific method to procreate the first-white-man-born in line. He ignored all moral and social codes and violated all norms of humanity to formulate his eugenic ideas. People like him carefully studied and pondered on the generational difference in the features of the half castes as though they were a new species which had developed and adapted itself to its new environment. What could have been the valid explanation on the part of these white men to justify their inhumane act? Would they justify themselves elucidating that it was a selfless task, that they were helping the heathen Aborigines become more like their image, uplifting them? The answer is not far to seek. The white man priding that he was made in God’s image wanted to replicate the process by making the Native in his (white man’s) image. In his arrogance he wanted to play God.

⁶⁰ Scott, *Benang* 24.

⁶¹ Slater, “Kim Scott’s *Benang*: An Ethics of Uncertainty.”

Those generations of Aboriginal half-castes that were forced to snap ties with their native traditions under the influence of western culture – as represented by Jack Chatalong, Kathleen and William Coolman – suffered a severe blow as they were neither perceived by the Whites as equals nor were they accepted by their own indigenous people as true Aborigines. They were trained to act and behave as the European colonisers did. Kathleen kept herself clean, “wore shoes...her hair shone...smell [of] the soap and fresh water...”⁶² and William considered himself “a man as good as any. His father had named him the first white man born”⁶³ and he defied anybody who called him an Aborigine. But initially they were totally unaware of what their white masters thought about them. In spite of all their devotion to white culture and mannerisms, these white masters still considered them to be Aborigines who were not perfect enough to be absorbed into the mainstream as the Chief Protector of Aborigines put it to William, “... you have as much hope as getting an exemption [from the Aboriginal Protection Act] as camel has of getting through the eye of a needle.”⁶⁴ They still had defects here and there, and the colonisers were working towards their aim to produce a pure white “breed” out of these half-castes.

Harley represents the present aboriginal generation that has been displaced from its tradition, culture and language. He looks upon himself as a successful product of his grandfather’s “curiosity about colour, about the remnants of it, the dilution of it”⁶⁵ and his interest in genetics spanning across three generations. According to Ernest’s scientific arrangement, Harley is the long-awaited pure white breed – “the first white man born.” Though, superficially, Harley has become the success that Ern has been craving for, he realises that he is now a failure as his grandfather “had so disfigured”⁶⁶ him that he has alienated him from his own aboriginal tradition and cultural heritage. The weightlessness that afflicts Harley throughout the novel is an embodiment of the ongoing alienation of

⁶² Scott, *Benang* 75.

⁶³ Scott, *Benang* 124.

⁶⁴ Scott, *Benang* 125.

⁶⁵ Scott, *Benang* 415.

⁶⁶ Scott, *Benang* 289.

the indigenous people from their own land. It also confirms the exploitative and debilitating effects of whiteness on the mixed-race progeny.⁶⁷

The white community believed that assimilating the natives into their culture was to save them from their degrading indigenous culture and other traditional practices. In doing so, the white colonists had displaced them from their own country and their aboriginal culture. Those who have “successfully” been absorbed into the mainstream now realise that they stand nowhere without a culture of their own on which they can fall back. Scott affirms that he is ashamed of the fact that he has lost touch with his tradition and native Nyoongar language. He senses that his “singing still makes people uncomfortable. It is embarrassing I suppose, someone looking like me, singing as I do.”⁶⁸ In spite of the shame that the author-narrator feels for not knowing his own culture, he knows that it is something that “We feel it then, share the silence.”⁶⁹ For robbing him of his identity and his right to belong to his aboriginal culture, Harley is strongly determined to prove his grandfather that he “was a failure, one way or another.... I wanted to undermine what he had done to the extent that he could never know where or when it might all collapse and send us plummeting down to ... to ...”⁷⁰

One cannot ignore the miseries and tortures that the natives have gone through at the hand of their colonisers. Families were moved to camps, reserves or settlements, whatever the white government preferred to call it. Sometimes, if need arose, family members were separated to avoid the half-caste children from mixing with the full-blooded natives as they believed that contact with the black aborigines could drag them down to their “savage” nature. The *Aboriginal Law Bulletin* records in “The *Stolen Generations Case*” that under the legislation *Northern Territory Aboriginals Ordinance 1918-1953*, the Aboriginal people were subject to the despotic control of a Chief Protector. He was entitled at any time to undertake the care, custody or control of any aboriginal or half-caste. He could on his discretion enter any premises and remove into

⁶⁷ Paul Newman, “Disgrace, Benang and the Search for Benevolence,” *Journal of Australian Studies* (2007): 83-96.

⁶⁸ Scott, *Benang* 89.

⁶⁹ Scott, *Benang* 9.

⁷⁰ Scott, *Benang* 350-51.

his custody an “aboriginal or half-caste. The Protector under Section 16 of the Act also had the power to cause any aboriginal or half-caste to be kept within the boundaries of any reserve or aboriginal institution or to be removed from one reserve or aboriginal institution to another reserve or aboriginal institution and to be kept therein.”⁷¹

But whom were they saving these selected indigenous people from? Scott raises a question of “Why are you trying to keep us back? Is it to make yourselves feel big?”⁷² And “Is there pleasure to be found anywhere in this pain?”⁷³ Neither were they allowed to interact with their own people nor were they welcomed into the white society which was looking forward to a “White Australia” free from the “dangers of contamination and infection.”⁷⁴ They had a vision for a new country, a new nation built on the image on their mother country. Allen Curnow, a New Zealander poet, in his poem “House and Land” cites an instance of a certain Miss Wilson who all of eighty and in spite of living in the colony still kindles memories of her motherland and her European culture.

There sat old Miss Wilson,
With her pictures on the wall,
The baronet uncle, mother’s side,
And one she called The Hall;
Taking tea from a silver pot
For fear the house might fall.

People in the colonies, she said,
Can’t quite understand ...
Why, from Waiiau to the mountains
It was all father’s land.

...

The spirit of exile, wrote the historian,

⁷¹ “The Stolen Generations Case,” *Aboriginal Law Bulletin* 3.73 (1995): 25.

⁷² Scott, *Benang* 292.

⁷³ Scott, *Benang* 178.

⁷⁴ Scott, *Benang* 295.

Is strong in the people still.⁷⁵

The “Cultural Cringe”⁷⁶ that the European settlers had about in Australia was quite strong when they compared themselves to their mother country. They were, therefore, bent on face-lifting the colony in the image of their motherland.

When Kathleen, Jack Chatalong and their other cousins were sent to a school, what they learned there in the first place was that they were abhorred by the whites. Racists insults began straightaway as the white children called them Nigger. On one occasion,

... they fanned out and made a circle around Jack, then closed it and, jabbing and poking, pinned him to the ground. One of them chased Kathleen and brought her kicking and struggling back to the group ...

They held Kathleen down, and one sat on her chest with his knees on her arms.

.....

They pulled her pants down to look for her paleness.

“Well, look at that,” said that one, Mark. “You should stay out of the sun, any rate....” He pulled his trousers down and bent over. “I’m bit dark myself, if you look closely,” he said, and wriggled his bum.⁷⁷

The half-caste children at school were exposed to violence and derisive comments, enough to make them wary of the White ruffians who strutted about with an air of superiority, arrogance righteous belligerence as they believed that the black children should not be in the same class as them. Hatred for the downtrodden black race was something that the children learned quite early in life. They would not let go of any

⁷⁵ Allen Curnow, *Early Days Yet: New and Collected Poems 1941-1997* (Auckland: AUP, 1998).

⁷⁶ Cultural Cringe, in cultural studies and social anthropology, is an internalized inferiority complex which causes people in a country to dismiss their own culture as inferior to the cultures of other countries. “Cultural Cringe,” *Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia*, 6 May 2008, Wikimedia Foundation, 17 May 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_cringe>.

⁷⁷ Scott, *Benang* 290-91.

chance to discriminate and disgrace the other aboriginal kids. Some of the few things they would not miss to chant were “What a smell, what a stink, such perfume,” “Nigger nigger pull trigger bang bang bang.”⁷⁸

The parents also protested and wanted the school authority to keep their children free from moral and physical contamination thereby implying that it was best for the races not to mix. A public meeting was held:

... to discuss the undesirable association of black and white [which was] enthusiastically attended ...

About one hundred and fifty people were present and the meeting voted as one on the issue. It was resolved that ... all white parents will cease sending their children to the school until the blacks are otherwise provided for.⁷⁹

Even after rigorous ways of assimilating the Aborigines, they were unwilling to acknowledge the rightful place of the natives in the multicultural society. Even with the next generation of aborigines, the White authorities were still following the practice of sending away mixed-caste aboriginal children to some orphanages/homes. Exploiting the children for their own needs was also still continuing. During Kathleen’s time, children were taken away from the reserves for domestic help and sexual abuse was also a common practice. Ern acted as a stud and impregnated almost all the maids at his house and Scott naming all those children at Sister Kate’s Home as Ellens and Tommys is a way to show Ern Scat’s rampant activity of sexual harassment towards many aboriginal women and fathering many half-caste children. Now as Tommy (Thomas Scat, Ern’s own son) was taken into Aunt Kate’s Home, he also became a victim of child abuse. Kim Scott gives an ugly picture of the traumatic phase of sexual harassment that some of these children of the Stolen Generations went through. When white couples came to these children’s home, the children were made to “line up, smile for the visitors, and they

⁷⁸ Scott, *Benang* 290.

⁷⁹ Scott, *Benang* 294.

might take you to their nice homes.”⁸⁰ And the way they picked these children – “I’ll have one of them, and one of them, and one of them, and one ...”⁸¹ – was like a child in a lolly-shop pointing to his/her choice of candies. If they were lucky, they got fostered by white parents who took them “To the beach, for fish and chips and ice-cream too.”⁸² But “if it was just the man,”⁸³ then his role as a benefactor varied as “uncle father doctor lover.”⁸⁴ Tommy, once while out with some of his uncles, faced the most dreadful nightmare of sexual harassment. They coaxed him saying:

“It’s a game. You close your eyes and we’ll put a lolly in your mouth.
Don’t bite it but.”

And one time it was not chocolate.

And it was a different voice.

“Suck on it.”

...

Well of course Tommy didn’t want to open his eyes. They were pulling his pants down and that.

Afterwards he got some white chocolate.⁸⁵

Nothing could be more degenerate than initiating children into such nauseating sexual perversions. The famous Australian playwright Jane Harrison’s play *Stolen* (1998) also affirms numerous kinds of atrocity inflicted upon the children of the Stolen Generations. It portrays the lives of five stolen children who are later culturally, psychologically and spiritually destroyed. Jimmy, a mischievous boy, turns out to be a sullen, angry and psychologically tormented person as he grows into manhood. His one desire in life was to be united with his mother and when he finally tracked her down, she died before he could meet her. His over burdened soul could not bear this catastrophe and he committed suicide. The suicide note sums up not only the plight of Jimmy but that of

⁸⁰ Scott, *Benang* 387.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Scott, *Benang* 388.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Scott, *Benang* 389.

other children as well in the Welfare homes. They were subjected to such inhuman treatment that they became social misfits:

JIMMY: ... Dear Mum, forgive me. I have sinned. I've been a thug and a thief – but I've never stolen anyone's soul... oh, Mum, why couldn't you have lived a bit longer just so I could meet you? I waited so long. Brothers, don't give up fighting. Don't let it happen again. Don't let them take babies from their mother's arms. Someone's gotta fight. I just can't no more. They stuck a knife into me heart and twisted it so hard. Prison don't make you tough, it makes ya weak, ya spirit just shrivels up inside.⁸⁶

Kim Scott's character Jack Chatalong, who "seemed to talk as he breathed, and so the teacher simply had to tie a handkerchief about his mouth to accustom him to silence of his own voice"⁸⁷ undergoes a similar phase of rejection and displacement. His loquacious childhood nature gets suppressed and is replaced by silence as he grows up – "he began to find it easy to be silent."⁸⁸

Like Tommy, Ruby – another character in the same play by Harrison – is an abandoned child and is used and abused by her white visitors. She, Jimmy and Tommy echo the lives of some of those stolen children who had been mistreated and sexually abused during their days at the children's home. They reflect unspoken abuses in the Australian muted history. A scene in which Ruby returns from her weekend trip with one of her white visitors tells it all.

CHILDREN: Can you keep a secret and promise not to tell ...

Where did you go?

RUBY: Swings and slides.

CHILDREN: Swings and slides.

What did you eat?

⁸⁶ Harrison 33-34.

⁸⁷ Scott, *Benang* 261.

⁸⁸ Scott, *Benang* 284.

RUBY: Ate fish and chips.

CHILDREN: Ate fish and chips.

What did he give to ya?

RUBY: Gave me a pitcha book.

CHILDREN: He gave her a pitcha book. What did he do to ya?

The kids stop the rhythm, Ruby hangs her head and holds her stomach.

RUBY: I promised not to tell.⁸⁹

Such awful and ugly experiences have created in these children a feeling of deprivation, discrimination and rejection in a society ruled by the culturally superior whites. As they grow into adults, they are dispossessed of their roots and native languages. They are people learning to live in two cultures, with nostalgic longing for their ancestral culture which was “being eradicated. All that death.”⁹⁰ This nightmare phase keeps haunting them even after their release from the institutions. It is a kind of heavy baggage that they have to carry all their life. One such person of the Stolen Generations, who was taken away at the age of four in 1955, narrates in *Telling Our Stories* that:

I think I spent about 11 years in missions and during that time there was a lot of suppression of feelings and we were not encouraged to show our feelings. I find as I am getting older that there is a build-up of this depressed feeling that I have.... It is part of the problem that I have had with my employment. I have left my last two jobs partly because of these depressed feelings and because I haven't been able to accept authority, which is a reaction to the authoritarian rules that we were subjected to at the missions.⁹¹

But severing links with their tradition did not help them to get into mainstream. They were not accepted into the white community who always held the opinion that “you

⁸⁹ Harrison 15.

⁹⁰ Scott, *Benang* 218.

⁹¹ *Telling Our Stories* (Western Australia: Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia, 1995) 190.

might have some bit of paper but we know what you are. You don't belong here. Not with us."⁹² They were still marginalised and oppressed; no empowerment was given to the aborigines.⁹³ They had no idea of being at "home." There was a common feeling of alienation from their own land, culture and knowledge as they were taught not to keep any contact with their Aboriginal ties, if at all they knew they were Aborigines. Their sense of belonging to a particular place was usurped as many of them kept moving from one institution to another or from one fostered family – back to the mission – to another fostered family. They all experienced a sense of loss of dignity, pride, self-confidence, of not being wanted and ultimately their identity.⁹⁴ Being inculcated into their mind to abhor their own blackness, their Indigeneity and also being removed from their own native culture, these stolen children instinctively adopted the non-Aboriginal values and culture and regarded it to be superior to their own Aboriginal tradition. This is the very reason why Harley, when he met his long lost relatives, found "each of them, without exception, forgetful. Some were boastful, some were frightened, and all of them only partially alive"⁹⁵ under the shadow of the towering white culture. Topsy (Harley's grandmother), too, was subjected to pressure to adopt the white ways; she succeeded in keeping her house clean without a speck of dirt; and she was well-liked by her neighbours. But in adopting the white culture, she had lost her aboriginality. Her "mirror in the bedroom had patches missing and her face was incomplete. There were areas of blackness, pieces where there was no her."⁹⁶ Scat's progressive attempt to make Aboriginality defunct through rape, scientific miscegenation and legitimisation of a few selective progenies is in tandem with the then current rational colonial discourse that visualised the Other as a sexualised object through which white masculine power and control are manifested.

But ultimately silence becomes Ern Scat's fate, the perpetrator, caused by his sudden stroke. By losing his speech, he is reduced to the role of a pathetic listener and witness to his grandson's narrative of white abuse and is forced to helplessly observe Harley's gradual connection with his Aboriginality. Ern, therefore, is an obvious

⁹² Scott, *Benang* 316.

⁹³ *After The Removal* (Western Australia : Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia, 1996) 64.

⁹⁴ *Telling Our Stories* 35-6.

⁹⁵ Scott, *Benang* 397.

⁹⁶ Scott, *Benang* 371.

metaphor of white Australia which like Ern is unwillingly witnessing the change and the voice that the indigenous writers and representatives are bringing about across the nation. On the contrary, Scott through his counter-history has produced a voiceless and helpless White Australia. The concept of whiteness itself is reduced to a questionable state when Scott reveals at the end that Sandy One Mason, seen as the first in a line of white men to formalise relationships with black women, is of mixed race. As Paul Newman states, this revelation “disturbs and disables the racial classifications sought ... and seen as boundary markers by white society.”⁹⁷ Scott’s *Benang*, therefore, is not only about the protagonist’s successful attempt of creating his Indigenous identity but also most primarily of the Nyoongar clan’s participation in a national wide struggle of reclaiming their lost Indigeneity. In his struggle to recreate the Nyoongar history and reclaim his own Aboriginality, Harley is continuing Fanny’s struggle – the matriarch in the story whose children, siblings, father, mother have vanished without a trace in the guerrilla history.

Fanny has embellished, linked, led him on. Later in the night, she and the fire spoke to all the sleeping, slumped bodies. She mumbled and sang softly to herself, often with words they might not know. Sometimes of children she had lost, the father mother that were taken. Her brothers, sisters.

Wondering, always, how to say it softly enough so that they might remember.⁹⁸

Kim Scott presents *Benang* as a platform where the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous Australians can start a dialogue for reconciliation and not assimilation of the natives into the white mainstream. The novel further destabilises the white dominance by proffering the Nyoongar people a place in the society, a sense of belonging and an identity. Scott writes that his people “have always been surrounded by others. Needed to communicate with them, and yet be wary and watchful.”⁹⁹ To save his people from damnation, Scott gives the native Australians a voice and *Benang* is their language

⁹⁷ Newman.

⁹⁸ Scott, *Benang* 247-8.

⁹⁹ Scott, *Benang* 474.

through which they articulate their past, present and future and also assert for their rightful place in the society.

Only when the Aborigines of Australia are granted their identity and rightful place can there be a legitimate hope of arriving at reconciliation and this would largely depend on the willingness on the part of the Australian government to provide narrative space for, and sincerely listen to, personal stories of suffering and atrocity. The White Administration, under the leadership of Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, have acknowledged on 13 February 2008 that their white ancestors promulgated policies of wrongdoing and publicly admitted its guilt, repented for its misdeeds and tendered an open apology to the Aboriginal community. This is the first act of goodwill to forgiveness and reconciliation. However, reconciliation will remain vague and unattainable if the government does not plan to implement any compensation for the loss and humiliation that their ancestors had caused towards the natives. Kim Scott's *Benang* has exposed the shortcomings and obstinacy of successive past Australian governments that sought ways and means of humiliating and depriving the original inhabitants of their identity.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

From the thorough reading and the critical attempts on the two works of Kim Scott – *True Country* and *Benang: From the Heart*, I have observed that Scott has used these two novels as a tool to portray the present state of the Australian Aborigines, mainly those concentrated around the Western Australian region and has also devised the second novel for the purpose of criticising the hideous plans and actions that the colonial government had carried out in the past to erase the “black spots” from the country’s map. Here the writer cites the Nyoongar community as the representative of all the indigenous people who had suffered an agonising history at the brutal hands of these insensitive and mercilessly inhumane outsiders. Streaks of personal historical/past accounts of the author in both *True Country* and *Benang* act as a means to authenticate the incidents and facts that he talks of in these two part semi-autobiographical and part fictional novels.

Lack of well-documented evidences has led to the birth of many Australian Aboriginal writers who have used orally transmitted history to speak of the atrocities that the natives have been subjected to since the arrival of the white colonisers. Many of them have employed either autobiographical/life story, fiction, prose, drama or poetry as a way to counter the assailing white domination and their appropriation of indigenous history. Tasmanian Aboriginal poet Errol West wrote in his poem “There Is No One to Teach Me the Songs” that:

There is no one to teach me the songs that bring the Moon
Bird, the fish or any other thing that makes me what I am.
No old woman to mend my spirit by preaching my culture to me –
No old man with the knowledge to paint my being.
The spectre of the past is what dwells within –

I search my memory of early days to try to make my presence real,
significant, whole.
I use my childhood memories of places, people and words to re-create my
identity.¹

These few lines show the very dilemma of losing one's culture and heritage. But, the indigenous people are upbeat that they have triumphantly used their own memories, life histories of older generations of Aborigines and their own to restore reality, "to make my presence real, significant, whole" as has been stated by Errol West. Their initiatives in utilising their "childhood memories of place, people and words" have helped these natives in rediscovering their true identity, their inherent relationship with the land they live on and, most importantly, their ability to assert their individuality against the fascist white community. As affirmed by Heather Scutter in her essay "Writing the Childhood Self: Australian Aboriginal Autobiographies, Memoirs, and Testimonies," the greatest leap in the Aboriginal Literature has been in the genre of autobiography, testimony and memoir. These genres of writing, containing social and political protest, are highly critical of colonisation and resist white assumptions about Aboriginal culture, family and childhood.

The developing Aboriginal literature, which has been an amalgamation of autobiography/life story writing, fictional writing, essays, prose works, poetry and plays, emphasises themes mainly on the issue of native identity, the spiritual and physical alienation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people during the colonial times. It also deals with the present-day issue of depriving Aborigines of basic human rights, the demand for land rights and the assertion of Aboriginal autonomy. Some of the Aboriginal works which have contributed to this progressive movement of the indigenous literary cult are Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (autobiography), Sally Morgan's *My Place* (life story writing), Ian Anderson's "Black Bit, White Bit" (critical

¹ Errol West, "There is No One to Teach Me the Songs," *Indigenous Australian Voices: A Reader*, ed. Jennifer Sabbioni, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998) 37.

essay), Oodgeroo Noonuccal's "Assimilation – No!" and "Integration –Yes!" (poetry) and Jane Harrison's *Stolen* (drama).

With Kim Scott, we see a different genre in this literary movement of the Australian indigenous group. He combines semi-autobiography, fiction and criticism to point out the white Government's sadistic policies regarding issues related to the natives (as shown in *Benang*) and also the poor state of living standard of the present day Aborigines (as indicated in *True Country*). This kind of writing falls under the category of Fictocriticism, a type of literary genre which has been defined as a hybrid writing which is "part critical, part theoretical and part creative"² and includes:

self-reflexivity, ... intertextuality, bending of narrative boundaries, crossing of genres, the capacity to adapt literary forms, hybridised writing, moving between fiction (invention/speculation) and criticism (deduction/explication) of subjectivity (interiority) and objectivity (exteriority).³

Scott's technique of incorporating documentary archives from A. O. Neville's book *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* in his second novel *Benang* has served as a critical method to ridicule and expose the atrocious policies of the white government to exterminate the existence of the black people from the country. Employing the method of intertextuality has, therefore, helped the writer to authenticate the ugliness of the whites in their dealings with the blacks, and exposed white history, which has completely glossed over the unethical and immoral deeds of the European colonisers and conveniently banished Aborigines from its pages. It is this cloak of obscurity regarding everything Aboriginal that is being removed by the works of Kim Scott.

² "Fictocriticism," 2003, University of Tasmania, 8 July 2008 <http://www.utas.edu.au/handbook_archive/UTASHANDBOOKS/UNITS/UNITSH/HEA435.html>.

³ "WRT and Fictocriticism," *WRT: Writer Response Theory*, 30 Sept. 2005, Administrator, 6 July 2008 <<http://writerresponsetheory.org/wordpress/2005/09/30/wrt-and-fictocriticism/>>.

Falling under the category of Fictocriticism, Scott weaves a story spanning across four generations of Aborigines in *Benang* and also finds a way of raising an argumentative issue over the treatment that the Nyoongar community had suffered at the hands of the colonial government by integrating incidents/people from his own family history and also by underscoring the then ruling government's agendas to wipe out blackness from the country through the process of miscegenation. In an interview conducted by Susan Midalia, it was affirmed that:

Benang ... was written as a fictionalised version of family history, in order to investigate non-Aboriginal attitudes to Aboriginality, issues of power, and the psychosis which Kim [Scott] believes lie at the heart of mainstream non-Aboriginal culture.⁴

This factual-fictional text rouses compassionate feelings for the native victims who were exposed to the maltreatment by their colonising masters. However, this emotional sense does not overshadow the logic behind such text. Working on the binary opposition, Scott, through this fictional work, critiques the authoritarian fascist attitude of people like A. O. Neville and Ernest Scat who perceived themselves as the scientists, the makers of a "White Australian" society and as those who represent the source of truth and rationality. Based on his eugenic theoretical ideas, Scat experiments with the Nyoongar women to control and define "the Other" which, he feels, is valid according to the concepts of science and reason. This discriminatory act, thus, glaringly limits the Nyoongar identity. And it is through the same medium of novel writing that Scott maintains that there is nothing objective, civilised or rational about such western outlook and scientific experiments. He visualises the gory scenes of mass genocide carried out by the whites in the Chapter "registering romance," of how Aborigines were caught off guard, mutilated and murdered in the middle of the night just for the fancy of torturing them and exercising their rights as the superior forces.

⁴ "Becoming-Woman: Australian Ficto-criticism," Murdoch University, 3 July 2008 <<http://www.lib.murdoch.edu.au/adt/pubfiles/adt-MU20051222.114143/06Ch4BecomingW.pdf>>.

Benang is, therefore, a critique of the European colonisation and systems that advocate arrogant and paternalistic brutalities. But Scott's critical evaluation does not fall within the boundaries of conventions of serious and rational criticism. His work positively belongs to fictocritical genre as he transgresses the boundaries of different kinds of traditional genres by combining two separate entities together to reproduce a unique work that can be considered to be in an "in between" state. He, thereby, destabilises the very notion of rationality, science and even dominant notions of aboriginality and whiteness. *Benang: From the Heart* seeks from its reader an ability to raise doubt over the hierarchy of white/black, Australian/Aboriginal and reason/emotion. It, therefore, is not only a work of fiction but also a highly informative text that incorporates theoretical insight, historical documentation and has characters representing images of real life personalities. This makes us to think and feel – to think about history, politics, representation and ethics, and to ponder upon our own action, beliefs and attitudes.

Scott's *True Country* also comes as a critique of the binary systems that exist in Australia as social ramification of the process of colonisation. The divides between white and black, the Standard English language and Aboriginal English language, written history and oral memorised history, and science and paranormal are visibly pronounced in this novel. Throughout the book, we see that there is always a tension or conflict between the Aboriginal people and the white community – whether it be with the white missionaries or the white teachers. The white Australians look down upon the indigenous people as a nondescript, lazy group who are always on the look out for government handouts and other easy ways to survive instead of earning their livelihood. On the other hand, the natives see the white people as destroyers of their culture, tradition and language and who are present at the missions to subjugate them further by instilling in them a feeling of inferiority by constantly adopting a paternalistic attitude. The novel also portrays how the half-castes are beset by mixed feelings. Having been thoroughly assimilated into white culture, they find themselves at odds with the people of their race. At the same time a sense of incompleteness overtakes them as they are not fully accepted

by the white races. Given this situation, there is a longing to rediscover their identity in their Aboriginality.

Scott has employed a non-didactic way to illustrate the animosity between the two cultures with both communities distrusting each another. He has incorporated his own past along with the harsh realities that one sees at the mission grounds such as the one in the story at Karnama into the fictional text in order to present the ugly, pathetic life that the natives are subjected to till today. His novel subtly calls forth from its reader the need to see the real picture of being an Aboriginal Australian who survives at the mercy of the government. Being consistently under the surveillance of the white authority has left them in a vulnerable condition where these towering white figures ingrain in them a feeling of low self-esteem, loss of self-dignity and contempt for their own Aboriginal identity. Raphael and his mates represent the faces of those indigenous people who have lost faith in themselves and in their Aboriginality. And people such as them have become the targets of the whites who, in their perspective, stand for the collective Aboriginal community. Such native people give the liberty to the white community to perceive them as a speck of dirt in "White Australia," as misfits in a so-called civilised community which does not have the patience and room for these indigenous people who are always "looking out for handouts; out for what they can wheedle from the next crew of white dogooders, government busybodies, investigators..."⁵

However, truth seems to be lurking somewhere far from view, under wraps and suppressed by the limited window-frame view as portrayed by the ruling colonial power. Scott, through this fictional text, reminds the white race of their past misdeeds. He talks of the doctored history that has been documented to suit their convenience and to portray themselves as the messiah of the dying heathens - Aborigines. Scott's character Fatima, the old matriarch in the story, contradicts many events that have been recorded in the mission journals. There are widely visible lacunae in these written records. One such incident was when she asserted, "It's not in this book but, the shooting, not in this

⁵ Scott, *True Country* 222.

mission book.”⁶ It clearly omits the white shooting of a young Aboriginal woman who ran away from the missionaries. This eloquently shows the discrepancy in the white’s presentation of the black history. And Scott, equipped with the genre of fictocritical writing, makes the effort to highlight this fact and the ever-growing unfairness on the part of the colonial power. He makes the same point in *Benang* too in the Chapter “we move...” when he talks through his “half caste” character William Coolman:

We may see how greatly facts are distorted and these people are most misleading in their trying to put the arrival of their parents in the new field before many others, for the sake of being known as descendants of the first pioneers.⁷

Kim Scott further stresses on the reality that the indigenous Australians still have an eternal link with their past and culture in spite of the onslaught and cultural wreckage that have been caused by the colonisers. He points out that the performance of “magic” and of “supernatural” activities as depicted in Aboriginal fictions or non-fictional writings are unlike the western concept of “magic realism” as described in fictions which are based on narratives that use fantasies as an integral part of its story writing method. As explained in Chapter Two of this dissertation (*True Country: A Critical Insight*), Mudrooroo terms this as “Maban Reality” which is an important part in the everyday life of the Aborigines.

Through all these depictions of realities regarding the Aboriginal society in his fictional as well as semi-autobiographical works *True Country* and *Benang: From the Heart*, as contrary to what the dominant society is trying to show, Scott – though without being despotic – criticises the various moves employed by the white government to subjugate the minority race and struggles to emphasise the fact that it is time now for every Aborigine to start rethinking their past and rectify the false impressions that the whites have constructed around them.

⁶ Scott, *True Country* 38.

⁷ Scott, *Benang* 168.

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