

THE ABORIGINES' INTERCONNECTIVITY WITH NATURE AND SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE LAND AS SEEN IN KIM SCOTT'S *THAT DEADMAN DANCE*

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Abstract:

Human beings have a natural affinity for nature. In this world everything is interconnected -- people, plants, animals, land forms and celestial bodies. This article reviews the interconnectivity between nature and the Aborigines. Land means different things to Aborigines and non-Aborigines. Aborigines have spiritual, physical, social and cultural connection towards their land. They give vital importance to land management. The tradition and belief systems of the Aborigines show their deep respect of nature and their strong sense of place and belonging. They have a profound spiritual connection to the land. They consider land as their mother. So they take responsibility to care for it. They convert land into grass lands for the sake of animals. But non-Aborigines and land owners consider land as something they own for commodity. Kim Scott's novels paint a vivid picture of the Aboriginal spiritual affinity with nature. This article reviews the inter connectivities between nature and the Aborigines, and their sense of belonging to the land as seen in the novel *That Deadman Dance* of the Australian writer Kim Scott.

Key Words : Aborigines, spiritual affinity, interconnectivity, sense of belonging

In 1770, Lieutenant James Cook, during his Pacific voyage, claimed possession of the East coast of Australia for the British crown. Before the European invasion, Aborigines lived throughout Australia, with the highest population. Here, people moved their settlements seasonally near the sea and rivers. The life of the Aborigines was closely entwined with nature. Aborigines enjoyed each and every beauty of nature like sun, moon, animals, birds, trees, rocks as well as water bodies and listened and responded to the sounds of nature.

This paper seeks to examine the Aborigines' spiritual affinity towards nature which finds expression in the the Australian novelist Kim Scott's novel *That Deadman Dance*.

Kim Scott is an Australian novelist, who claims ancestry among the Noongar Aborigines of Western Australia. He has written five novels: *True Country* (1993), *Benang* (1999), *Lost* (2006), *That Deadman Dance* (2010) and *Taboo* (2017). In his novels he has explored the

problem of self-identity faced by the Aborigines and the effects of the imperial assimilationist and absorptionist policies during the first decades of the twentieth century. He is a recipient of the Miles Franklin Award and the Victorian Premier's Prize

Kim Scott's novel *That Deadman Dance*, explores the early contact between Aborigines and the Whites. The main character is a native Noongar boy Bobby Wabalanginy. He becomes the witness to the effects of colonization and the gradual takeover of his land, his people, and his culture by the Whites. This novel highlights the spiritual affinity of the indigenous people with nature.

The Aborigines' conception of nature and the land differs from a Western understanding of land, soil or landscape. Anthropologist Philip Clarke observes: "While Western Europeans today tend to think of themselves as separate from the 'natural' world, Aboriginal people consider that the social and physical aspects of their existence closely intermesh" (15). In *That Deadman Dance*, Bobby is associated with whales from his birth: "He was not much more than a baby when he first saw whales rolling between him and the islands, a very close island, a big family of whales breathing easily" (1). He feels a kinship with the creatures of the sea: ". . . with so much family out there in the sea . . . hearts beating and the calls of brothers and sisters moving through water. . . Outside and inside, ocean and blood; almost the same salty fluid" (259). The natives are uncorrupted by the civilized world's materialism, and enjoy an unsullied bond with aspects nature like the animals, birds, fishes and plants. The animate and inanimate worlds are fused and become one in the perception of the Aborigines.

On the contrary, the Whites see the whales only as commodity and potential for reaping high profit. Their imperialistic, nationalistic and capitalistic motives are prompted by a materialistic worldview. They exult in the fact that if they catch more whale, they can earn a lot by marketing the oil, and the whalebone: "A few more whales and Captain Brother Jonathon would have all the oil he could carry . . . Chaine could have all the bone; there was still a market for the fine structures from their mouths, stays and bustles for the fashionable ladies" (239).

Aborigines know everything about nature. The westerners use the technological invention of the compass to find their direction. But the natives have no need of any such instrument. They use the stars to guide their travels. Some Whites seek the company and guidance of Bobby and Wooral to travel through the forest. They follow a path which the Whites find rocky and scattered with fine pebbles. But Bobby and Wooral feel comfortable travelling amid the various spectacles of nature as though walking with different personalities with whom they have a deep connection: "Sometimes Wooral addressed the bush as if he were walking through a crowd of diverse personalities, histone variously playful, scolding, reverential, affectionate" (42,43). This shows the natives' spiritual affinity with nature.. Even in an eerie atmosphere when the day light fades, the natives imagine the pattering of raindrops as footsteps of children dancing around them: "Drops of water fell in clusters from the straggly trees and prickly shrubs with a sound like tiny footsteps rushing and dancing all around them"(46).

The Aborigines have a sense of belonging to the land, a sense of being an intrinsic part of nature, of being one species among many species, all of which have their rightful place. The question arises why then the Aborigines hunt the animals for their food. Hope Maclean offers a satisfying explanation: “Animals are necessary to support human life. The animal world is seen as equal to, if not more powerful than the human one – both on a spiritual level and in the physical world. The hunter reveres the animal, and asks it to make a gift of itself, so that humans can eat. Animals comply and give themselves to the hunter who shows proper respect” (qtd. in Preece 166). The following passage from *That Deadman Dance* bears evidence to this: “Kangaroos and wallabies, and quokkas and tammars, heavy with young came to where the grass sprang up There was never trouble with food and shelter”(55,56).

The question of ownership or possession of the land is perceived differently by the European settlers and the Aborigines. The Whites express their materialistic greed in trying to take possession of the land that they have come across. But the Aborigines who have been living there for ages do not care about possession of the land. On the other hand they have a sense of being owned by the land. Possession is one of the methods of acquiring property. The Whites have the intention to possess the land of the Aborigines, not only because it is a beautiful landscape, but because they find it to be a good grazing ground for their sheep, and prospective areas for big plantations. Whale hunting is another profitable enterprise. The Whites found that if they wanted any land for farming or grazing, they could easily drive away the native Aborigines, who were nomads with no concept of land ownership. Melissa Lucashenko writes: “We see the world that white people see, but we are also seeing a mythic landscape at the same time, and an historic landscape. White people see Rotary parks and headlands; we see scared sites. And we are looking at bush food” (qtd. in Chenery). The white settlers fail to understand the close relationship of the Aborigines with the land.

Kim Scott elucidates in his novels about the land and ownership of the land. Dr. Cross, one of the first settlers, is a kind man and seeks peace with the Aborigines and builds a strong friendship with Wunyeran, a tribal elder and uncle of Bobby. He has the coughing disease, which the Europeans spread to many of the Noongar, killing them. Wunyeran is also affected by the coughing disease. The Aborigines are unaware of this, and when Dr. Cross sitting by a campfire outside a small hut, announces, “ I have taken this land, . . . My land”, and shakes hands with everyone, “Bobby shook hands with Wooral, with Cross and Wooral again” (49,50). This shows how the Aborigines do not care to whom the land belongs. They find comfort in the fact that they belong to the land.

Dr, Cross is buried in the same grave as his friend Wunyeran, as per his own wish. After the White colony is established, a headstone is erected over the place where Dr. Cross and Wunyeran are buried. Bobby notes that the headstone carries only the name of Dr. Cross, and Wunyeran’s name has been erased from memory. Later, Dr. Cross’s coffin is taken by the Whites and reburied in the Christian cemetery constructed exclusively for the Whites. Through the construction of such structures and memorials, the Whites assert their ownership and claim to belonging. Wunyeran’s body is left and some of his bones are stolen by dogs while others destroyed by the builders. While the civilized Whites preserve memories by structures

such as headstones, the indigenous heritage is grounded in place and preserved in oral stories. In Noongar tradition, human remains are regarded as part of country, and join with non-human matter to nourish future generations. Bobby ruminates: “Always been this way. Bones from riverbanks washed down toward the sea, and only a kindred spirit . . . can find them, maybe bring alive again’ (315). The narrator observes that “long after Bobby Wabalanginy and the span of this story” the site of Wunyeran’s burial might be called “a *significant* site, a *sacred* place” (309) for future Noongar generations. As an old man, and an entertainer, Bobby tells the tourists , “This is my country, really. This is my home” (71). He bases his claim to the country on the fact that the Noongars have lived there for a long time: “My country is here, and belonged to my father, and his father, and his father before him, too” (94). “. . . we people. . . have been here for all time” (349).

Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* is a vivid narrative that highlights the Aborigines’ emotional bond with nature. There is a sense of veneration and sacredness in their relationship with the land, air, water. Because of this close connection with the land, when the land is disrespected, damaged or destroyed it affects the well being of the Aborigines. Their attitude is extremely opposite to that of the White colonizers, who consider nature as a mere object, offering possibilities of commercial gain and materialistic prosperity. While the colonizers are bent upon claiming ownership of the land which they acquire through sales deeds and bonds, the natives claim a spiritual ownership that it is the land which owns them.

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