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Exploring the process of Breeding out the Colour through Kim Scott's *Benang*

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Abstract

Benang: From the Heart is a novel that expresses psychological damage experienced by the author. This work is based on his family history and deals with the process of breeding out the color. It explores the issues of isolation, self- identity, cultural oppression and colonial power. It depicts the struggle of the aboriginals and the problems of race and color, and exposes discrimination.

Key words: cultural oppression, race, colonial power, color, discrimination, aboriginals, self-Identity, psychological damage.

Introduction

Kim Scott is an Australian novelist of indigenous Australian ancestry. He is a descendant of the Nyoongar people of Western Australia. He began writing shortly after becoming a secondary school teacher of English. He is a member of the center for culture and technology, leading its indigenous culture and digital technologies research program. He is the first indigenous writer to win Miles Franklin Award for 'Benang'.

Scott confirmed that it was inspired by his research into his family and his growing awareness of that family history. The main context of this work deals with the process of "breeding out the color". The novels deal with the exploration of the solution to the problem of self-identity faced by the light-skinned aboriginal people and examine the government's assimilations policies during the first decades of the twentieth century. It is a moving depiction of cultural oppression and the resilience of the Nyoongar people, from the times of the first contact with the white colonial power. The narrator speaks through his stream of memories and facts. The novel explores black and white heritage which is made up of 14 language groups. The town at the center of Benang-Wirlup Haven and Gebalup corresponds to the town of Hope town and Ravensthorpe. The prose is beautiful and oceanic as the blurb tells us. The lyricism enables us to see the landscape through different eyes-the seas, the bush, the caves, and the rocks and the creeks. The story is about –how

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the young narrator ultimately finds his true place within his Nyoongar heritage. It's all the about the Exploration of Identity of the struggle of finding one's place. There are aspects of magical realism too. The subject matter is very confronting. Benang is not a litany of complaints rather it focuses on the absurdity of the notion that there can ever be a "first white man". It's a book looks to a future, enlightened by an understanding of the past. This novel shows how the Ethnicity of the Nyoongars is endangered. It depicts the struggle of the aboriginals exemplified in the black characters, how to cope up with their objectivities created by the whites and how the narrator overcomes the "existential unfreedom of the black body" to regain his identity under the white gaze by a healing identification with the black people and culture, from a sense of psychologically damaged being.

'Benang' is a semi-autobiographical novel, Kim Scott with his mixed heritage (both Nyoongar and English), is the first white man born in his immediate family. He wanted to express the psychological damage and cultural dispossession he has experienced. Hidden under the white skin is the indigenous identity that Scott wanted to bring out like the protagonist of this work, Harley Scat.

In A.O. Neville's text, "Australia's Coloured Minority", race is represented as just color however it is also a matter of socio-culture hierarchy. The change in the skin color, from black to white, represents a matching set of behavior organized around the white nation of decency, work and morality. Thus the process of "breeding out the color" carried on, in the name of "Liberation of the black". Under his direction, Aboriginals were turned into objects given identification number and a personal file—to help them whether a native is qualified for exemption from the Aboriginal Protection Act—to erase indigenous identity and culture as it required complete disconnection from other natives and homeland. It exposes racial prejudice or discrimination. Wearing a white mask and being part of the mainstream was more convenient than an exemption. Thus, Sandy one, Sandy two and Will cool man lean towards their white identity. (Because even exemption leads to harassment of Harry who was told by a white man— "you don't belong here. We know what you are. Not with us.")

Sandy one Mason, was represented as a pure white man throughout the novel until near the end Harley establishes him as an aboriginal. Jack two called him "blonde ancestral hero" – blonde

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here confirms him to be white in the eyes of others. He saved his family to the possible extent with his whiteness. By not acknowledging identity openly, he tried to protect his family to offer them a future and to be recognized by the settlers. He was aware of the consequences if he had embraced his nyoongar identity openly. He had seen Mrs. Mustle, with her sister in law harasses her slave. So, Lisa Slater observes, “Racism causes Sandy to participate inadvertently in assimilation practices, which results in him losing control of his speech." Scott writes about him, “his tongue was wooden and dead, the skin turning black and flaking all the time. Words left him faster than he had ever acquired them”. Harley’s uncle Will too rejects his black identity under the pressure of the white gaze. As a kid, he wrote local history, established his white father the earliest settler, ignored his native mother—overlooked the territorial dispossession his mother's people had faced. He was a quadroon- totally a white through Ernest's eyes. His father Daniel names him "First White man born”, cut off his aboriginal connection, kept away from those relatives. Though he was sent to the aboriginal department when he wanted to buy land in the town- Due to white’s ambivalent approach to miscegenation, fear of white degeneration. Homi Bhabha argues that colonial discourse never really wants its colonial subjects to be exact replicas of the colonizers – this would be too threatening. Daniel Coolman was successful in following Neville's idea. He brought up Will like a white man and married his daughters to a white man.

Will defended his father, “what could he do? He had to look out for his children”. His discomfort is a clear sign of his acceptance of the identity imposed by the white world on him. He was a model example of native upliftment. Leaving behind his aboriginal roots, he married a white woman, never let his kids meet their grandma. But ironically, for a living, he was shooting kangaroos and it was his mother who taught him hunting.

Nyoongar women in contact of whiteness have been turned into body machine, an instrument in the process of the creation of, “the white man born". Female characters are appearing momentarily, before disappearing in the background, even Harley’s mother.

“A story of men, with silent women fitting in the background”.

Women have been denied the mother identity; instead, white men replace them, by holding the generative power of procreation. Harley states, “my grandpa intended to be my creator… I was his product.” Both Kathleen and Topsy are treated as an object, victims of Ernest’s sexual desire

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and Eugenicist project. When Ernest saw Kathleen the first thought the occurred to him is "opportunity". Kathleen is bestowed with the identity of "white girl" by Sergeant Hall, the local protector. To keep that whiteness intact, he was not allowed to go outside the house. She could not give Ernest a son and was replaced by topsy, she was now useless for Ernest and thrown out of his life. For Ernest, Kathleen is a voiceless body and Topsy Is even better specimen as she was fathered by a White man, Stuart Hall. Ernest's scientific eyes observed (for Topsy) "young and small, as fine-boned as a bird, exotic looks, golden hair, spoke with remarkable elegance—she seemed almost a new species." Ernest starts shaping Topsy's identity as a white woman, who has to see the world from the white side. This imitation is forced on Topsy who is the tyranny of the white. It reaches its pinnacle when she gives birth to Tommy who cannot be called "the first white man born" due to a change in the law. Disappointed and frustrated, Ernest "poured bleach into hot water, pushed Topsy's head under. Kathleen and Topsy, using mirrors, both tried to perceive themselves through their own eyes. But what reflected back was—the white gaze pointing at their "increasing areas of blackness, more pieces missing and making them invisible." The helplessness of a black body questioning their reflections as they examined themselves on shinning surfaces of knives, pot, pan, forks to try to ascertain—what remains and what has been taken away. Harley is apparently the success of Ernest's eugenic project—he is the "the first white man" created by him after a number of failures. Harley's body has no visible signs of his aboriginal ancestry, was carefully kept away from black relatives and was strictly supervised, "as his reversion would mean failure of his experimentation". Thus, when Ernest sees Harley's school report indicating his lack of potential and native laziness, in frustration he kicks him "sending him sliding across the floor".

Harley's known linear narrative indicates his undoing to Ernest's linear progress (as presented in the photos, not captioned with the name but racial category). The idea was to erase out blackness from the skin, fraction by fraction with each generation. From "full blood" to "half-caste" to "quadroon" to "octoroon". Drawing from the evolution theory of Darwin, aboriginal people were represented at the bottom of the scale of human progress which placed white man at its peak. Harley finds himself among these photos as "octoroon grandson".

"I saw my image inserted into a sequence of 3/4, in which I was always at the end of the line."

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While Ernest finds Harley in his library, he realizes that his carefully documented scheme has been discovered. In shock, he falls to his knees, leaving Ernest paralyzed – symbolically represented the powerlessness of white gaze. When Harley got access to Ernest's documents, he begins to reverse the eugenic act. He deconstructs the power relationship between them, right before his grandfather's eyes as he watched helplessly. Harley feels alienated in his own skin "hovering over a mirror, I saw a stranger". Earlier he used to wonder over his white appearance, not knowing for his aboriginal inheritance – later he understands that all of them were deceived by their grandpa's "various mirrors". The aim of "grandpa's mirror" is to create a white body—a notion of whites – but there is always a potential threat of "return of color" or "throwback" as a way of Aboriginal resistance. Ernest's whole life's efforts were at stake with Harley, who embodies his success; till Harley started undoing his every effort – Ernest maintained "selective separation from ancestors" (presented through the tree by Harley's window –"it towers over the house and grandpa believed its roots threatened the foundations. He was right-the roots have cracked one wall". Insecure with the stability of the white identity (what he constructed) for Harley, grandpa orders- "cut down the tree. Burn it, dig out its roots"). "He might also have written –Displace, Disperse, Dismiss. The tree symbolizes the" tree of Nyoongar family threatens with the possibility of a strong root, that can overcome Harley anytime". Harley cleverly trimmed the branches which were close to the window giving Ernest the illusion that there is no threat. And when Harley brings Ernest to the garden to his horror, he sees the trees standing there—"the trees still lived, it would grow again". Similarly, Harley's aboriginal family while depleted and diminished is intact and hold potential for new life to spring forth, from those who remain. Jack, unlike Harley and Will, has been in constant touch with his black identity. He brought the real history of their black ancestor, (not constructed by the colonizers). He introduces Harley to the Nyoongar community and his relatives. And Harley, with his intuitive power, reads beneath Sandy One's white skin, establishes him as an aboriginal, thus reconstructing his family history.

Sandy one was noted and filed as an "Englishman" under S. Hall; his grandma was an aboriginal woman raped by a sealer- his grandfather. A fellow also states that "Sandy one is a nigger, really?". The transition of Sandy one Mason, from a white man to aboriginal – has set a family precedent. It has turned the roots of the family from white to black.

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Harley starts writing to recover from the situation to know who he is! He is in search of a language to find his style of speech- to bring together the parts his grandpa has left. He has to find a counter-narrative to make the Nyoongar voices heard "we are still here; Benang". White men holding the power of procreation, feminine role and a black man in the black man in the process. Through his relationship with the two sisters, Harley re-establishes the feminine and masculine sphere in the novel. By participating in the act of reproduction with the two sisters Harley undoes emasculation black men has been subjected to. Harley stated, "the two of them helped me grow from my bitter and isolated self".

The question arises, "why any amount of white blood does not one white?" but "a little amount of nyoongar blood includes one in the aboriginal race?"

In spite of descending from both, Nyoongar and White community, Harley started to reject his whiteness and reconnect with his Aboriginality. Harley refuses to be objectified, refuses privileges of being white, seems to be in the process of dissolving Manichean Binary—black and white, uncivilized and civilized, colonized and colonizer – as evident from his fathering children with both black and white children. He is eradicating the differences. In peace with himself, he forgives his grandfather at the end of the novel.

Slater observes, "Scott is attempting to reverse the colonial process that controls, regulates and limits indigenous people by categorizing them. He insists on the complexity and singularity of Nyoongar people."

"Perhaps it was this sort of detached interest, that of the scientist, with his trained mind and keen desires.

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