

Decolonising Narrative Space: Racial Oppression and Colonial Trauma in Kim Scott's *Benang* and *That Deadman Dance*

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Abstract

This paper examines racial oppression and colonial trauma in Kim Scott's *Benang* and *That Deadman Dance*. The novels focus on the lives of aboriginal people and show how colonisation affects their families, communities, and sense of identity. Scott brings attention to indigenous experiences that are often left out of official histories and challenges the way Australia's past is commonly represented. The novels explore how colonial beliefs about racial difference influence the lives of aboriginal people and contribute to their marginalisation. Racism navigates not only through discrimination against indigenous people but also through social beliefs, cultural practices, and institutions. Scott illustrates how indigenous people face restrictions on their lives while continuing to protect their culture, identity, and connection to their land. When grief and trauma remain unacknowledged, they continue to affect individuals and communities, making healing and belonging more difficult. A major concern in both texts is the persistence of grief and memory. Scott demonstrates that the suffering caused by colonisation does not disappear with time. Instead, painful memories continue to affect individuals and communities, creating feelings of loss, displacement, and uncertainty. The novels suggest that ignoring historical injustices only prolongs their effects, while recognising and confronting the past becomes an important step towards healing. The study argues that Scott's novels challenge dominant historical narratives by bringing Indigenous experiences to the centre of the story. They show that healing cannot occur without acknowledging trauma and that reconciliation

Introduction

In discussions of postcolonial trauma theory, scholars have challenged its original Eurocentric limits. Michael Rothberg argues

that trauma theory, when confined to Western paradigms, risks misrepresenting historical violence, noting that it remains “tied to a

narrow Eurocentric framework, it distorts the histories it addresses (such as the Holocaust) and threatens to reproduce the very Eurocentrism that lies behind those histories” (Rothberg 227). This highlights the need to decolonise trauma studies to include multiple historical and cultural experiences. Such critiques of trauma theory highlight the importance of understanding how race and racism function not only in historical narratives but also in everyday social and institutional contexts. Race is an idea created by society based on how people are seen physically and culturally. Racism is not only about direct insults or personal discrimination. The idea of “everyday racism,” as claimed by Philomena Essed, shows that racism is also part of normal daily life and larger systems, as it “is more than structure and ideology” (Essed 2). It happens in small everyday actions as well as in institutions like education, law, or

government, where power differences are built into how society works.

In *That Deadman Dance*, Christine’s reflections echo the racial indifference. She observes that “[t]he native girls they kept now, the servants, might almost be family also and yet one must — as Papa said — impose one’s will” (*That Deadman Dance* 340). To him, their constant laughter, their habit of playing without what he would call purpose, and their difficulty in following instructions prove how necessary it is, in his view, to help and civilize them. He reflects on Bobby, noting that “the boy was capable of so much, had so much potential and remarkable influence over his own kind ...” (*That Deadman Dance* 340). He emphasizes that “he had fed his friends and family from our stores and enterprise and now his influence was so much the greater.” The father worries aloud about the consequences of allowing such autonomy to continue, asking what would happen to the family if

this influence remained unchecked. He claims that Cross had begun this process, asserting that Mr Cross encouraged ideas of entitlement rather than “respect and a work ethic” (*That Deadman Dance* 340). According to him, Cross did not instil the necessary discipline to postpone immediate gratification. This ultimately exposes the deep anxiety within the settler household, in which every gesture of indigenous autonomy is reinterpreted as a threat to the order they believe themselves obliged to enforce.

In *That Deadman Dance*, Menak suggests that Bobby stay with Cross to learn. Although Cross teaches Bobby the alphabet, he does so only through English, insisting on slate boards and phonetic exercises. “They began with slate and chalk, and although Bobby soon proved himself adequate to quill pen, ink and parchment, Cross kept him to the slateboard. There was a shortage of paper so far from home” (*That Deadman Dance* 140). The teaching method is therefore shaped by

both material scarcity and ideological intention. By restricting Bobby to slate work and English phonetics, Cross confines his learning to a system that prioritizes settler language, settler literacy, and settler ways of recording knowledge. His instruction does not simply educate. It reshapes, narrows, and redirects Bobby’s modes of expression so that they fit within colonial expectations. Cross proudly notes that the boy is “[a] *most intelajint kuriositee*,” a remark that reveals both admiration and condescension (*That Deadman Dance* 140). To the settlers, Bobby becomes an example of indigenous adaptability, proof that assimilation is possible only when indigenous identity is shaped to match European expectations. Bobby learns quickly and begins writing in phonetic English. Yet he writes: “*We haf taked ther land. Deseez and depredashen make them few*” (*That Deadman Dance* 140). This is a striking and painful moment. A child who is beginning to acquire settler literacy

records the violence that accompanies that literacy. Without fully understanding the meaning of the words, Bobby reproduces the narrative of dispossession even as he reveals its truth.

Montagu's argument helps reveal that racial categories are constructed and used as tools of power rather than reflections of natural human divisions. Ashley Montagu argues that "within any society men might be persecuted or made the object of discrimination on the grounds of differences in religion, culture, politics, or class, but never on any biological grounds such as are implied in the idea of "racial" differences" (Montagu 9). The belief that human beings can be divided and judged according to racial differences emerged later and became a way of distinguishing between groups of people. Montagu's observation helps explain how racial distinctions became a means of categorising populations and maintaining divisions between different groups. This

perspective is relevant to postcolonial studies, which examine how such classifications influenced relationships between colonisers and indigenous people.

In Gebalup, the concerned townsfolk organise an Indignation Meeting, attended by members from all local clubs, including the newly established Australian Natives Association. The discussion takes a sharp turn when someone raises the issue of campers on town lots: "What about the people — yes, these niggers, but there's plenty of white men among them too — who are camping on town lots?" (*Benang* 206). This emphasises how racialised structures extend throughout social spaces, where the presence of indigenous people is treated as a social problem that threatens the order of society. Mr. Starr, a member of the Roads Board, explains that the board has requested police intervention to remove the campers from the town lots and direct them to areas on the town's outskirts. The discussion quickly

expands to broader civic concerns, including the condition of the roads, the urgent need for a new dam, and the proper management of water catchment areas. The townspeople express outrage at what they see as a failure of governance, questioning how teamsters are to be prevented from encroaching on reserved spaces. Daniel Coolman reflects on the meeting, noting that he no longer identifies himself as a teamster, indicating his awareness of the complex social hierarchies and racial boundaries navigating in the town. Constable Hall documents the meeting in a restrained bureaucratic tone, describing it as “the gathering was lively, well attended, and that everything past correct and orderly,” emphasising the phrase by underlining it to affirm the town’s outward appearance of civility despite the underlying tensions (*Benang* 207).

At the same time, Sandy One’s longing to “strike it rich, be a boss man” illustrates the internal pressures of colonial

modernity (*Benang* 272). His dream to “do that for Fanny” and prove his worth to his family shows how indigenous identity is forced to measure itself against Western ideals of prosperity and self-sufficiency (*Benang* 272). Yet his efforts remain bounded by systemic exclusion. His “firm and rigid humpy” built near the beach is soon made illegal, “there were laws about camping now,” as colonial authority and invasion expand into every corner of indigenous life (*Benang* 274).

In *Benang*, the Coolman brothers, Daniel and Pat, participate in economic ventures alongside settler families such as the Mustles and Dones, engaging in mining operations and constructing the rabbit-proof fence. Uncle Jack highlights the difficulty of reconciling these partnerships with the historical violence inflicted on indigenous communities: It’s “a very hard thing for us to understand, and forgive. A very hard thing for us to accept” (*Benang* 173). While the

Coolman brothers may not have personally participated in past killings, their economic alliances with settler authorities implicate them in systems that facilitates dispossession and mass murder. Fanny's experiences at the station reveal the brutal realities of colonial control. She sees an old man left chained and abandoned in the sun, while women are restrained in the stables and subjected to the threats and malice of the station men. By freeing him while protecting her child, she shows how indigenous people navigate and resist oppression within spaces under settler domination. These events highlight not only the physical danger faced by the indigenous people but also the lasting psychological trauma that followed.

The reference to permits to kill, as recorded in Harley's grandfather's papers, places the violence within an official and institutional context, showing how colonial authorities legitimised massacres of aboriginal people. "Eighteen, they were

allowed to kill eighteen... More than that, they killed just about everyone around here" (*Benang* 177). Even after leaving the station, the trauma persists, as the memory of these events continue to haunt the community. Uncle Jack notes that many local Nyoongar people still avoid the area entirely. "Most Nyoongars still won't come here, just wind up the windows and drive right through Gebalup" (*Benang* 177). This reflects the long-lasting fear, cultural scars and trauma created by the massacres and violence. These accounts make clear that settler power is relied on institutional authority, physical coercion, and economic relationships to maintain domination over indigenous people. The massacres and systemic oppression are not isolated incidents but pivotal events that shape land ownership, social hierarchies, and intergenerational trauma. By situating individual experiences, such as those of Fanny and her family, within the context of these colonial massacres demonstrates the

severity of settler violence and its enduring effects on aboriginal communities. When trauma, grief, and painful memories are not properly acknowledged or addressed, they continue to affect people long after the original event has passed.

Unresolved suffering can cause individuals or communities to repeatedly relive their pain, a process described as re-traumatization. As a result, they may feel trapped between the past and the present, unable to find peace, closure, or a sense of belonging. “The trauma, the grief and the memories—which, left unresolved, can re-traumatise people and create a ‘limbo’ world in which they have not been able to go home” (qtd. in Maddison 155). Jean-Paul Sartre presents decolonization as a transformative process involving a painful but necessary reassessment of the values and assumptions shaped by colonialism. He suggests that freedom from colonial rule requires not only political change but also the

rejection of ideas that supported domination and inequality. He highlights the need for moral and social transformation alongside political liberation. Sartre emphasises, “... we, too, peoples of Europe, we are being decolonized: meaning the colonist inside every one of us is surgically extracted in a bloody operation. Let’s take a good look at ourselves, if we have the courage, and let’s see what has become of us” (qtd. in Maddison 1).

The social problems and injustice are not caused by just one powerful leader. A leader can only stay in power because many people and groups support the existing system. Ronald A. Heifetz argues that the real problem lies in the everyday actions of people who accept, support, or do not challenge unfair situations. When many people continue doing things the same way, even if those ways are harmful, the system remains unchanged. Therefore, real change cannot happen simply by replacing one

leader with another. It requires many people to change their attitudes, learn new ways of thinking, work together, and make compromises. Everyone has a role to play in improving society. Heifetz asserts, “The evil, if it is evil at all, lives in the routine ways in which people throughout the system collude in maintaining a dysfunctional status quo” (Heifetz 238). Therefore, Reconciliation and decolonization are not goals that can be achieved once and for all. The relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians cannot be created instantly. Decolonization, therefore, involves examining one’s own assumptions, acknowledging historical injustices, and taking responsibility for creating a more equitable future.

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