

FORGING AN ABORIGINAL IDENTITY: A RE- PRESENTATION OF HISTORY IN KIM SCOTT'S 'BENANG'

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Abstract:

The main aim of this paper was to illustrate how Kim Scott's 'Benang' re-construct an Aboriginal Identity which was dismantled by the superior White race. Many Aborigines in Australia are separated from their families, culture, tradition, myths because of colonization and they are uncertain towards their own culture. One thing which differentiates 'Benang' from other historical novels is its 'Dual narrative' because it portrays the perspectives of both Aborigines and Whites without any bias in re-presenting history. The narrative discusses many Individual stories which are centre in re-presenting history. The hidden pains, sufferings, longing for homeland, nostalgia, loss of identity are expressed more deeply in individual history rather than factual history. 'Benang' not only includes individual stories but also official documents, newspaper articles, letters and reports. 'Benang' portrays the individual ways of coping with political and social pressure and how some Aborigines are hiding their aboriginal identity in order to be accepted by the superior White society. On the other hand it also portrays how an aboriginal man who has brought up in a white way of culture embraces Aboriginal culture. 'Benang' gives answers for the questions such as Who are Aborigines? What is Aboriginality from individual perspective? Why Aborigines have to hide their culture for mere survival? Why Aboriginal men are inferior towards themselves? Why the land is called as the land of wilderness? Why the Whites want to breed out the colour and change the Indigenous race into White race? Why identity becomes a question for stolen generation? Why reconstructing identity is important in present scenario? Australian Aborigines have given freedom officially in 2008 and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has apologized for the sufferings and loss of the stolen generation. Even though they have embraced their freedom they are uncertain about their identity because they have no connection with the ancestral past. 'Benang' is not only a narrative of heartland but also a guide to retrieve one's aboriginal past and promotes positive approach to re-construct one's dismantled identity in the present scenario.

Key Words: *Nyoongar; colonization, colour, assimilation, archives.*

Benang is a historical novel which portrays one particular group of community called Nyoongar and its disconnections with its past and land. It is difficult to re-trace the dismantled community with minimum fragments of existing evidence. On the other hand, 'Benang' proved that it is possible to trace one's historical past through individual research of existing evidence in fragments. The protagonist Harley is an absorbing narrator who is tracing back his family history through absorbing Photographs, reports, letters and other evidences. All the incidents, issues and struggles faced by Aborigines are depicted in the novel through his eyes and it gives a positive hope to re-construct their identity.

The term 'Aborigine' and 'Aboriginality' is portrayed through many individual interpretations in *Benang*. 'Aborigine' refers to a native inhabitant of Australia and 'Aboriginality' refers to the spiritual bonds between the Aboriginal people and their place of heritage. This very definition clearly says the connection between the individual and the land. Here, this connectivity is presented through individual perspective and it varies from person to person. Ernest Solomon Scat, the grandfather of Harley wants to protect his grandchild away from the Aboriginal culture. According to him, Aborigines are uncivilized and the White way of living is considered as civilized. He always speaks about timetable, goal setting, and

importance of White heritage to Harley because he wants to wipe away the aboriginal way of thought in the child's mind. In this way, Ernest tried to disconnect Harley and his Aboriginal past. He says,

Language is a f-f-f-fence that keeps you out. Daniel Coolman will speak some Nyoongar. It was all curses, mind, a black tongue. That's the sort of the language it is. And now there's no one left to tell you what you want. You can never know. (39)

According to Mr. James Segel, Aborigines are filthy people with bad smell in their skin and fools to be used for free labour. He always scans his eyes on them to classify them according to their colour as half-blood, full blood like that. According to Mr. A.O.Neville, Aborigines are merely specimens and they are experimented in the process of breeding. According to Jack Chatalong, being an aborigine is like living within a sphere and it's a restriction to enjoy the privileges of Whites in the society.

Benang portrays the individual ways of coping with political and social pressure and how some Aborigines are hiding their aboriginal identity in order to be accepted by the superior White society. William Coolman belongs to Nyoongar ancestry as well as white ancestry. He will roam around with whites because of his white skin colour. Nobody will identify him as an aborigine very easily. To avoid the danger of being brought under the Aborigines Act of white government, he keeps himself away from his own community people including his mother Harriette. He marries a white woman from Germany and doesn't tell his children about his aboriginal ancestry and community. SandyOne Mason is another aboriginal man who tried very hard to adapt himself in white society. While A.O.Neville is writing a report on him, he refers to Sandy's colour, his character and his connections with his aboriginal family. After investigation, he has written that he has no connection with his family. Sandy has arranged marriages for his daughter in white man's way. According to him, this might be the only way to do things to survive in white society. Both William Coolman and SandyOne Mason decided to repress their Aboriginal ancestry because they thought that it would be the only way to lead a decent life in society. Jack Chatalong is sending an application to an officer to issue the exemption certificate. His application is rejected because of insufficient evidences to prove his disconnection between him and Aborigines. Jack attempts to come out of that aboriginal sphere merely to enjoy the privileges of Whites in the society but he failed. Kathleen tries to live like a White woman by wearing shoes, clean dress, soap and fresh water smells from her. After she married a White man, she faced many circumstances to disconnect her relationship with her family in order to live a comfortable white way of life. In this way, *Benang* portrays the effect of colonization and native people's uncertainty towards their own culture through individual history.

The most important aspect of the novel is its attempt of re-constructing history through Harley's research from the archives and his attempts to write and trace his family history. One of the important evidences is Photographs and its citations. He came to see the photographs of Aboriginal families in groups and classified according to their colours, with captions like "As I found them" (27), "Identical with above child"(27,28), "full blood, half- caste (first cross), quadroon, octoroon"(28). He has seen his own image among the photographs and he sees his father's photograph with the caption "Octoroon grandson (mother quarter caste (No.2), father Scottish). Freckles on the face are the only trace of colour apparent"(28). From these photographs Harley is able to analyze how his ancestors are diluted by whites to get more proportion of white blood among them and to wipe away the existence of black blood. This is the essential visual evidence for him to see the images of his ancestors who are the victims of lost identity and they have mixed identity based on their colours. He goes through papers and reads,

Breeding up. In the third or fourth generation no sign of native origin is apparent. The repetition of the boarding school process and careful breeding. . . . After two or three generations the advance should be so great that families should be living like the rest of the community. (28)

Through the paper he realizes that Aborigines are used as specimens in breeding experiment to

change the entire Aboriginal blood into White blood. Scott has written a narrative which not only talks about the paper texts and photos collected by Whites but also talks about the memories, the hidden voices and individual stories of the Nyoongar ancestors apart from the boundaries of lines.

The next important archive is the reports written by the Whites about Aborigines. Harley reads an extract from the file of Sandy Mason and sees the white way of describing an aborigine. The report has written by A.O. Neville where he describes Sandy on the basis of his colour and addressed him in the report as an half-caste but has a lighter skin. He inquires a local neighbour Mustle about Sandy's connections with his Aboriginal family. He investigates in the Repatriation department about Sandy's lung problem. After he realizes that Sandy has no connection with his family, he writes a report positively and sends to the official that he may have a possibility of getting a job. He has stored all the information merely for the social and biological absorption of the "Native Race" (46).

Harley sees some papers have evidences of laws implemented in the Aboriginal land by the Whites. The Aboriginal Protection Act is passed by the White government to take care of the Aborigines. This law deals with genealogies, personal histories, court cases, requests for marriage, employment and all the issues related to the Aborigines which is handled by Mr. A.O.Neville, the chief protector of Aborigines. These departments are merely established by the Whites to absorb the experiment of breeding and making the black community to adapt white way of living. Daniel and Harriette registered their marriage according to the law. After Daniel's death, his properties belong to Harriette. The next important archive is letters written by the individuals throughout the novel. The following letter is written by Jack Chatalong:

*Gebalup October 26, 1929
The Chief Protector of Aborigines*

Dear Sir,

In regards of the Aborigines Act has it 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 my mother was a black woman and my father was a white man and I can Read and write But I have now Been barred from going Into a Pub and having a drink because I have got no permit so Could you do any thing in the way of granting me a certificate of exemption.

*Yours faithfully,
Jack Chatalong*

(64)

He has just applied for exemption certificate from the Chief Protector to enjoy the privileges of whites in the society but his application is rejected because of insufficient evidences to prove his disconnection with his Aboriginal community. To merely enjoy the privileges of White men, Jack has made attempts to come out from his community to lead a white way of superior life.

Through some papers Harley is able to know about the plight of stolen generation in residential schools. Many children are travelled by carriages and finally reached the settlement of Whites. He reads, "You were driven to the settlement like animals, really, but of course it was not for slaughtering. For training? Yes, perhaps. Certainly it was for breeding, according to the strict principles of animal husbandry" (94). He has observed clearly that many children are taken away from their aboriginal mother and brought up in settlements and residential schools. By separating the children from their parents, whites not only disconnected the children physically from the family but also from the land, culture, heritage and identity of oneself is completely decimated.

Harley has searched for his aboriginal past, culture and Nyoongar people. He has exiled from his

people and his aboriginal history has hidden by his parents. He has lost his connection with his Nyoongar community and he later comes back to his men. He overcomes the racist discourse, moves beyond racism and colonial power and finally joins with Nyoongar people. He has traced his family history through archives and finally reunites with his community. Harley's discovered aboriginality illustrates the importance of reconstructing identity in positive way apart from the negative consequences of colonization. *Benang* is a narrative of heartland because it talks about the native land of one community who lost it because of its various circumstances but at the same time, the narrative gives a positive hope of retracing one's lost identity. As in the words of Martin Renes, "*Benang* works with multiple shifts of perspective and polyphony, but adds fragmentary and nonlinear story telling techniques as narrative devices as well, equally breaking away from realist formulations of the autobiography and novel."

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