

**THE ABORIGINAL CULTURAL HERITAGE: A REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN
ABORIGINAL WRITINGS**

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Abstract

Colonialism was a juggernaut that pulverized the native cultures and tried to replace them with European culture. When the Whites arrived on alien shores, they brought the bag and baggage of their ethnocentric biases with them. The Europeans thought that their culture is the only mainstream culture while all other cultures are deviant. Sometimes stories were forced to demean the native cultures sometimes the cultures were interpreted diabolically to make them look inferior. One of the first casualties of colonialism was the native culture. Colonisers displaced the natives and devised policies that would stop the transmission of culture. Native literature written across the world shows a commitment to the revival of native culture. There are certain practices that have been lost but whatever is left is being codified by the native writers for the future generations.

Key Words

Colonialism, Culture, Aboriginals, Native, Sacred, Kinship, Half-caste.

The Europeans boasted of developing the scientific temper after the Enlightenment. They boasted that their culture was the only scientific culture in the world. The Native cultures were described as unscientific and were rejected. However, the native writers show that the tribal truth is different from the European truth. The writers write their side of the story courageously. They need extreme courage to write about their culture because they are liable to be rejected as backward and superstitious. However, the native writers are not worried about the tagging, they continue to write about their culture and assert their nativity.

For the Natives, their culture is very important because it does the job of balancing. The White men destruct while the Natives preserve. Moreover, the ceremonies of the Natives were aimed at the holistic growth of the individual; the white culture on the other hand, offers hollow materialism. The Native cultures are essentially rooted in the local environment where they have deep knowledge and understanding of the local conditions. However, this knowledge was disrupted and in some cases was lost when the Natives were displaced from their homelands.

In the literature, the Aboriginal writers show their commitment towards Native culture. In the novels of Kim Scott, for instance, the heroes yearn for their Aboriginal roots. In *Benang*, “Harley is the first white man born” (12). He starts searching for his aboriginal roots when he comes to know about the truth. Similarly, Sally in *My Place* herself takes the challenge to search for her Native roots. The important thing is that people like Harley and Sally could easily merge among the whites and enjoy all the benefits that are available for the whites. However, they still choose to search for their Aboriginal roots and identify themselves as Aborigines. On the other hand, Aborigines face a lot of hardships in their daily lives including racism. Why the characters choose Aboriginality over privileged Whiteness is an important topic of research.

The first thing that differentiates the Natives from the whites is their lifestyle. While the whites stress on individuality, the natives live in communities. Among the Aborigines, the family consisted of the whole tribe. One of the most important features of the native society was the centrality of family and extended kinship system. All the female members of the tribe were considered “ngunyjtu” (mother) and the same principle was followed for relations like father, grandfather and so on. These extended families acted as a social insurance for the people. Children and old people were taken care of. In this society, nobody was allowed to remain hungry. The whites who called themselves civilized, their real face is exposed by the Aboriginal writings. The writers show that the Aborigines were full of kindness and compassion which lacked in the other people.

The communitarian lifestyle is one of the universal elements among the Natives. The natives of Australia and America, for instance, make sure that every child is taken care of. In fact, it was this universal value of the Natives that allowed them to survive against the onslaught of the whites. Thousands of people died due to White diseases and massacres, if

other people had not taken care of the children, then they would have died after their parents.

The strong kinship system of the natives allowed them to survive.

The close kinship system among the Aborigines was a kind of social security system, in this system everybody took care of everybody. There was no concept of uncle or aunt. Anybody who was a father's age was called father, and any female who was of mother's age was called mother. In this system, nobody was allowed to remain an orphan. In *That Deadman Dance*, the readers are told that even birds, animals, and plants are included in this extended family system. Dr Cross, a White, writes about this family system:

They have entrusted me with a child, a boy, Cross continued, although in truth the boy comes and goes as he pleases. He is family, so Wunyeran told me, but whether nephew or some relation more distant I do not know. Almost everyone seems related, in one way or another even to birds and animals, and plants and things in the area. (39)

The above paragraph is only suggestive of the relationship that exists between the Natives and the other things. Now when readers go forward into the novel, they realize that there exists no concept of stepfather or stepmother among the Noongars. For instance, the readers come to know that Bobby's parents had died and he and his sister were brought up by Wooral. Scott writes in *That Deadman Dance*: "All his friends and family kept that boy Bobby Wabalanginy alive, just by loving him, wanting him to stay where he was. Stay in this place" (133).

The Aborigines considered children as a treasure and children like Bobby who became orphans were taken care of. On the other hand, the White society behaves differently. In the novel, Kim Scott writes about two adopted children James and Jeffrey. Their foster parents make them work at home but they do not have resentment for it. James and Jeffrey both did all the chores at home, they milked the cows grew the vegetables in the kitchen garden washed dishes and clothes. Both of them did all the household chores happily. Their foster "father rarely had reason to strike them" (*That* 194). However, these good days did not last long for them. Their conditions changed when their foster mother became pregnant: "And then Mother became pregnant. Had a shitty baby. A baby that got all the love and their eyes and hugs even, and just gave vomit and tears and crying" (*That* 194).

Kim Scott makes clear that the love of their white parents for James and Jeffrey lasted only till they did not have their biological child. Once their biological child arrived, bedding of James and Jeffrey was moved to the shed and their meals became less regular. They went inside the house only for the Bible lessons. Now the only frequent thing was the punishment meted out to them. The beatings were brutal:

Father punished him like a child. Put the gangly boy across his knee and beat him with increasing energy and ferocity, which was partly by seeing Killam tied up and flogged had upset them so. (195)

This kind of behaviour did not exist among the Natives. Bobby in *That Deadman Dance* is also an orphan but his foster parents never treat him like that. He enjoys all the facilities that his foster parents can provide. Mudrooroo tells that children are considered sacred among the Aborigines:

Our Aboriginal societies are based on a powerful all-encompassing religion. We believe that our children are born of women but conceived by a spiritual source whose font is land. (*Us Mob* 20)

The aim of the life of the Natives is to live a life in closely-knit society where everybody is available for everybody. In this society, nobody was allowed to live alone. The people cared for everybody. All the relations were honoured and respected and most importantly taken care of. On the other hand, the whites are selfish people who care only for themselves. The Aboriginal writers show that the white families are fractured because of their selfishness. The whites care only for themselves and this selfishness leads to many complications. The Aboriginal literature shows that even the White priests, who were considered the best of human beings, were selfish to the core. In the novel, *Plains of Promise*, Errol Jipp has tasted filth because he had sexually exploited Ivy, a half-caste girl who was put under his protection. He sexually exploits a young child because his wife has stopped sharing his bed (36). His exploitation of Ivy shows that he is a self-centred man who fails to sympathise with his wife. Instead of understanding her problems, he tortures her. Moreover, this exploitation of Ivy shows this scant respect for children and confirms that no child is safe with the whites.

Kim Scott also writes about this kind of behaviour of the whites in his novel *Benang*. In the novel, the writer tells the readers that Ern had married Kathleen. He sires a daughter

with Kathleen who is named Topsy. Ern is lecher who has no fatherly feeling for his own daughter Topsy. His thoughts about Topsy reveal his intentions. "Little Topsy, he noted, was no longer so little; breasts budding, hips altering the way she walked" (134). He introduces his daughter Topsy as his wife Kathleen to his neighbour (134). He enters into a sexual relationship with his own daughter:

When Kathleen found Ern embracing Topsy, bending her over their matrimonial bed with her skirts all bunched, she could only give a little noise of surprise (135).

Ern starts living with his own daughter Topsy and sires children with her. This shows that the white man has no sense of relations. For them, even the bloodline is not sacred. This confirms that even the biological children are not safe with the whites. On the other hand, the Aborigines took care of the children of other people as their own. There are so many instances which show that children sired by White men with Aboriginal women were brought up by the Aboriginal community.

The Aboriginal concept of family was not restricted to human beings only, rather the animals and plants were included in the extended families. Dr. Cross writes about this unique relationship: "Almost everyone seems related, in one way or another. Even to birds and animals, and plants and things in the sea" (*That* 39).

The special relationship with the animals is evident in the novel *That Deadman Dance*. The novel opens with the description of whales "rolling" between Bobby "and the islands" (2). Throughout the novel, readers are told about the special relations between the whales and the Noongars. While living in the coastal area of Australia, Noongars had developed a special relationship with the whales. On the other hand, the Whites start killing whales for their oil and this hunting for profiteering depletes the population of whales and they stop offering themselves to Noongars. The whales as the brothers of Noongars also sacrificed their lives for the Noongars. In the novel, Kim Scott does not give any instances of the Natives killing a whale. The whales used to come to the shore to die and to be used by Noongars as food. Kim Scott writes about Menak for the arrival of the whale: "The old man stayed at a distance, waiting for a whale to come to die under his hand. But no whale came to him all the season" (326).

The whale for the Noongars is not an animal rather it is a living being with which they have a deep and enduring relationship. A system of communication existed with the whales. That is why "Bobby heard the whales singing. They sang for him" (*That* 282). Bobby, a Noongar, has learnt the white culture and he acts as a pilot for the whale hunters. However, he is acutely aware of the ties his people share with the whales. That is why refrains from killing them:

Bobby had no part in these things. He could find whales, and could chase and run with) them. But his hands could not kill a whale. He was only a steerer, And when it was time for cutting and boiling and for stepping through bloody gore and smoke he often went to where his people and their friends were feasting on the whale carcass on the sandy beach. (*That* 325)

Similar is the case of the position of women in the society. The White narratives portrayed Aboriginal society as patriarchal where the males acted as dictators in the society. However, Kim Scott presents a totally different picture of his people. The readers are told that the Native women were strong and asserting (*That* 309). Moreover, the women in the society were even free to choose their life partners. In the novel, Scott shows how Binyan chooses Jack Tar, an American, as her life partner. The women were also the food providers for the families (*That* 220). In the novel, the readers realise that the Native women were not timid:

In the bush, this are end of the world, Jak Tar came to think of the half-naked and barefoot woman as queen Mani. It was clear she was accustomed to command. No Jewellery, though at most a few feathers and some possum fur, no rouge on her cheeks, though there might be fish oil and ochre; no bustling skirt's supported by whalebone corsets, though she knew well the right whale from when threat those corsets came. (*That* 221)

There was a sincere effort on the part of the Aborigines to include Christianity in their traditional beliefs. In fact, remarkable syncreticism has taken place in Australia. Mudrooroo writes:

Indigenous spirituality can co-exist along with Christianity, and among many strong Indigenous Christians a number of the old customs and beliefs continue, such as respect for the land and ancestral beings. They see no conflict in this. (US Mob 45)

The syncretism happened only on the side of the Aborigines, the Whites did not do any effort on their part to include any of the Aboriginal beliefs in their belief system. The syncretism, in the religious beliefs occurred because many of the Aborigines were raised-up in the missions where they were taught about Christianity. Many of them might have reverted back to their traditional beliefs, but the influence of Christianity remained. In *Carpentaria*, for instance, Angel Day brings a statue of Virgin Mary from the rubbish dump (23). The discarding of the statue of Virgin Mary at the rubbish dump shows that religious figures like Virgin Mary are showpieces for the Whites, while the Aborigines bring them home and give respect to them.

It is important for the Natives to resuscitate their culture because their identity is linked with it. Moreover, Kim Scott says that Aborigines may have lost their culture, but culture still works for them. Sally Morgan also writes about the same kind of experience in *My Place*. She has a premonition about her uncle's death through a dream. She writes: "One night, after I'd spent a long session with Arthur, I fell into bed exhausted. That Night, I had a dream. I knew he was going to die (209). This shows that the Aborigines had these special powers in their culture which are nowhere seen in the European culture.

Hence, from the above description, one can easily aver that there are certain essential differences between the White culture and the Native culture. The native writers highlight and accentuate the differences between both the cultures. In contemporary times, science has also freed itself from the European influence. Scientists have started accentuating the important aspects of the original culture that played an important role in preserving fragile environments across the world. The native cultures are localized; they do not make claims that their cultures are universal like the Europeans. However, there are certain universal elements among the Native cultures like love for the environment and community life.

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