



St. Joseph's Journal of Humanities and Science

ISSN: 2347 - 5331

<http://sjctnc.edu.in/6107-2/>



The Indigenous Voice in Kim Scott's novel *That Deadman Dance*

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ABSTRACT

That Deadman Dance is a historical novel by the Australian writer Kim Scott. The novel is set in the early 19th century and it explores the first contact between the Aboriginal Noongar tribal people of Western Australia and the European colonizers. The protagonist of the novel Bobby Wabalanginy belongs to the Noongar tribe and the novel is from his point of view as a child and an old man. He witnesses the effects of colonization as the colonizers gradually take over his peoples land and their culture. One of the first settlers is Dr. Cross who is a kind hearted man and he seeks peace with the Noongar people. Dr. Cross teaches Bobby to read and write and becomes friends with his uncle. Unfortunately he dies to a disease which spreads and many of the Noongar people end up dead. Bobby is a performer of the 'deadman dance'; it is a dance that mimics the stiff movements of the European settlers. The Noongar people perceive them as dead because they are lacking the spirit of the Aboriginals. This dance is the relection of the emotions of the Noongar people. The novel closes with the final performance of Bobby which reflects his frustration and anger towards the colonizers. The novel deals with the serious issue of discrimination to a particular segment of the general people. Kim Scott himself a part Noongar has portrayed the suffering and bias faced by the tribes in this novel.

Keywords: Bias, deadman dance, discrimination, settlers, tribes.

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INTRODUCTION

The novel *That Deadman Dance* is a historical fiction set in the early 19th century. Historical fiction is a literary genre which transports the readers to another time and place, either real or imaginary. The genre comprises the narratives that take place in the past which characterized imaginative reconstruction of the past events. The novel written by Kim Scott explores the first contact of the Australian aboriginal tribe Noongar with the European settlers and American whalers. The novel depicts the effects of colonization. Kim Scott, son of a white mother and Aboriginal father. Most of his works explore the issues of racial identity and indigenous Australian ancestry. *That Deadman Dance* is Scott's third novel and it has won the Miles Franklin Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Western Australian Premier's Book Award.

The novel is about an indigenous tribe named Noongar. The indigenous people are those related to the people who have originally lived in a place. The various indigenous people of Australia or the Australian tribes are called as Aboriginals in general. The story takes place in the Western part of Australia and proceeds with the process of European settlement and the conflicts caused by the settlers. The novel can be viewed from two points of view, the European point of view and the Natives point of view. Though the settlers' initial aim was to develop their trade and business, the natives viewed them as a threat. By the end they of the novel they will feel disgusted by their presence and they will begin to reject them by resorting towards violence.

The protagonist of the novel is a Noongar tribal boy named Bobby Wabalanginy. The novel is constructed in a non linear structure, as the plot often jumps from Bobby being a child and an old man. When Bobby is introduced in the novel he is a

nine year old and later the readers would encounter him as an old man doing tricks for tourists. He witnesses the effects of colonization, as the settlers gradually take over his people's land and their culture. The newcomers find difficulty even in pronouncing his name. His Noongar name translates 'all of us playing together'. As his name suggests he is optimistic, friendly and full of laughter. His friendly, curious and good natured disposition makes him easier to move between his people and the 'pale horizon people' as how they call the European settlers. Bobby is an intelligent and natural comedian and a showman. He is a clown, shaman, tells stories in the form of songs with music and he creates the 'deadman dance'. This ironic dance is a genius mimic of the stiff movements of the European settlers, as the tribes perceive them as dead because according to them they are lacking the spirit of the aboriginal people.

Dr. Cross, an ex-military surgeon is one of the first settlers and the leader of the new settlement. He is a kind hearted person, he extends his culture and teaches young Bobby to read and write. He would share his home and food with the tribal people. He seeks peace with the Noongar people and its community. He also befriends Bobby's uncle Wunyeran who is the elder tribe of the Noongar community. The elders of the tribe consider Dr. Cross as a friend because he is open to the customs and culture of the tribes. So the Noongars hope to coexist peacefully with the new European settlers.

ACCEPTANCE AND FEAR

As Bobby learns the white man's language he joins the Americans in whaling trip and helps the Europeans. Bobby goes whaling with Jak Tar, an American ex-whaler. He becomes so close with these newcomers as he falls in love with Christine, the daughter of a merchant named

Geordie Chaine. Young Bobby remains carefree throughout his childhood. Bobby is found happy with his newly found friends but eventually everything will change. Through young Bobby the readers would experience the deep mystical and tribal animalistic culture of hunting and gathering.

Dr. Cross and the settlers come along with a disease which Bobby calls as a 'coughing disease'. It spreads through the Noongar people and many end up being dead by it. As many American whalers and European settlers land on the Western shore of Australia Dr. Cross realizes that soon the harmony that the tribal people hoped to seek with the settlers would be shattered.

The tribal people become less and less happy with their newly landed neighbors. Things have begun to change around them. The things which they owned would begin to disappear or get destroyed. Accidents and injuries would begin to occur often. These incidents would make the tribes to wonder, what is happening around them? Why this sudden change in their habitat? Who is the reason behind it? For all their questions the only answer was the settlers.

Later Dr. Cross dies of his illness. Even in his dead bed he is worried about the future of the Noongar people as he considers them as his companions. His close friend, uncle of Bobby and the elder of the tribe, Wunyeran also dies. Dr. Cross's last wish was to share his grave with his close friend so that they could continue their friendship after death. So they both are buried together. The new settlers were different. They always impose new rules and regulations and punished the natives even for a simple mistake. They began to plunder the lands, crops and animals that belonged to the natives and even shoot them if they stood up against them. When

the Europeans decided to expand and build in the Australian land they took Dr. Cross's body and reburied it in a white Christian grave. Whereas Wunyeran's body is left exposed, while some of his bones are taken by the dogs and some are destroyed by the builders.

As more lands were colonized and the settlers began to use the natural resources from sea and land Noongar people begin to face scarcity. The settlers act 'angers' the natives and the elders decide that they have to do something. They ask Bobby to choose sides who has always been a part of both the people. The series of events which he would face in the course of his life would change his perspectives about the new neighbours.

THE INDIGENOUS VOICE

The novel shifts in time as this part of the story is narrated by the older Bobby. When he thinks of the past he finds that the settlers came along with worthless things. They came with gifts and trade only to tempt the natives into their illusion. They gifted flour, sugar, alcohol, etc. Bobby realizes that accepting such gifts was a bad trade. The way the settlers tried to use the lands resulted in degrading its resources. The Aborigines identify themselves with each living creature. They considered as innate. The white people were quite the opposite, they destroyed the lands to build factories which lead to soil erosion, they never understood the usage of fire to regenerate growth, they introduced new wildlife which was unsuited for the area, they hunted the whales until only few were left and in short, they destroyed the balance of the ecosystem.

The older Bobby realizes that he didn't know the real fear until he became an adult. As Bobby ages, his ability to move between the two worlds become lesser. He finds that the white settlers were not only asserting their dominance over the

lands but also over the Aboriginals. The tables have turned over the decade where the settlers are unwilling to share their food and resources with the Noongar people.

The older Bobby is viewed as an odd person. He becomes a street performer who dances, launches boomerangs and tells stories to entertain the passing tourists. Since, Bobby spends most of his time on the streets he finds that his people are not good traders like the settlers. In his songs he would sing his feelings out. He sings that the tribes learned the words, songs, stories about the settlers but tribes didn't know that the settlers were not going to listen to their voice. The tribes' voices are unheard. The dance which he performed comically as a child has now become the dance of necessity. He has been acting out and his frustration is resulted in his performance. He was acting against the injustice that has been forced against his people. He also mocks the caricature of different settlers among the white people. Bobby's performance reflects his anger towards the settlers who have slaughtered his people with guns and coughing diseases, endangered the whales by hunting and eroded the soils leading to scarcity.

The novel ends with the final performance of Bobby, the final version of the 'deadman dance'. This dance expresses the emotional narrative of the struggles of the Noongar people. This is his final attempt to communicate and express the spirit of his land. Unfortunately no one is left to understand this old man's dance. So Bobby is being laughed at and humiliated by the viewers. Bobby undresses himself by shedding the European dress and tries to regain his tribal kingship. While his final attempt is futile, his defiance reflects his resistance to European sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

The novel can be divided into two different periods. First is when the Noongar people were tolerated for the use of the settlers as they needed the locals for their selfish reasons. The second is when the misunderstanding started to grow. When the Aboriginals realized that they were only used for labour and they were neither treated as equals nor repaid for their services. They also found that their natural and food resources were in scarcity because of the settlers.

This novel shows how the newcomers were viewed by the Noongar people. It also portrays how the people try to adjust their eyesight to view their strange appearance and the changes that occur in their community. They try to re-envision them as their own people but the settlers have failed to do so. So the Aboriginals begin to consider the settler as 'ghost' or 'pale horizon people'. Later they would realize that these 'ghosts' are not going anywhere or will never let them to live in peace. Language also becomes a barrier which leads to lack of communication. Even though Bobby has learned to read, write and communicate in the settlers' language the white people never considered him as their own.

Kim Scott, son of a white mother and Aboriginal father has clearly conveyed his thought process through the novel. The readers would find a mutual connection between Bobby and Scott. Bobby speaks and reflects the thoughts of the author. Through the deadman dance the readers would witness a performance which was the outburst of the prolonged domination. The powerful and devastating dance is the final situation of the Noongar people. Through these series of events Kim Scott has brought out the voices of the indigenous people in this novel. These voices might not be audible to everyone but these voices would never fade until it is heard by the invaders.

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