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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Block 5 **Fiction by Indigenous Writers** traces the development of the Australian Aboriginal novel from the mid twentieth century till the present.

Unit 15 “Aboriginal Australia: an Introduction” provides the background for the detailed study of the Aboriginal novels in other units. The antiquity of Aboriginal presence on the Australian continent, the concept of ‘Dreamtime’ and the ‘Dreaming’ which define all aspects of Aboriginal life; the significance of land and bonding with the land in Aboriginal life; Aboriginal cultural practices such as story-telling and painting; the violent history of contacts between Aboriginal people and the white settlers; the trauma and suffering of Aboriginal people as a result of the White Nation State’s policies of exclusion and discrimination are discussed in this unit.

Unit 16 “Aboriginal Australia: From Resistance to Reconciliation” discusses Aboriginal responses to European culture, politics and nation making strategies during the years following settlement in Australia. The unit focuses on Aboriginal activism and resistance and the various protest movements of the Aboriginal peoples as well as the recent shift towards the discourse of ‘Reconciliation’.

Unit 17 “The Aboriginal Novel and Kim Scott” establishes that the Aboriginal attempt at writing the novel — an essentially European cultural practice—has its roots in the Aboriginal people’s practice of narrating Dreamtime stories. The unit traces the development of the novel as an expression of Aboriginal creativity, introduces the writing of Kim Scott and discusses the contribution of Kim Scott in the making of the canon of the Australian Aboriginal novel.

Unit 18 “*Benang From the Heart: the Background*” introduces Kim Scott’s novel *Benang*, a part-fictional, part-historical/biographical work. Since the novel is concerned with re-telling the history of the Noongar community from the perspective of a member of that community rather than relying on the biased documented “White” history, the unit looks at look at the writings of the Chief Protector of the Aborigines, A.O. Neville about the Noongars.

Unit 19: “*Benang from the Heart: a Critical Analysis*” provides a brief outline of the plot of *Benang* and discusses the theme of Aboriginal identity construction in *Benang*.

UNIT 15: ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA: AN INTRODUCTION

Structure

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

While reading the novels in your course, you might have come across various Aboriginal characters, their distinctive world-view, and their cultural practices. You may have noted, in the course of your reading, how their contact with the White world, the colonizers and the modern day multicultural Australia has been marked by violence and disquietude. It would hence be helpful if we can throw some light on Aboriginal Australia—an otherwise less discussed and consciously dis-remembered aspect of the Australian nation-state. In this particular Unit, we will talk about how the Aborigines were the most ancient group of people to be living in Australia. We will try to understand their worldview and their cultural practices. You will also come to know how these Aborigines were colonized by the White settlers through both subtle and open state practices. Although coerced to become subjects of a colonizing power, the Aborigines have never been voiceless, and have constantly resisted the colonizers. Their means of resistance were conflictual and cultural, openly political and subtly subversive.

1.1 INTRODUCTION: ABORIGINAL PRESENCE IN AUSTRALIA

From the days of colonization, Australia had been projected and envisioned as an essentially White world, and even up till recent times there had been claims by its majority citizens for a “White Australian Nation”. The first move during colonial days to claim Australia as a land for the settlers was to declare it as *terra nullius*. The phrase *terra nullius* meant ‘land inhabited by none’. This doctrine made it possible for the settlers to unlawfully usurp Aboriginal lands, forcibly evacuate and deterritorialize¹ their Indigenous inhabitants. This made it possible for the colonizers to deliberately deny the fact that the Aboriginal people were the original owners of the land. This act of overlooking the presence of the Aborigines in the Australian continent, was a strategy adopted by the colonizers to erase the history, value systems, culture and in effect the identity of the Aborigines. Even the claims of modern day Australia to promote an open un-insulated culture of multiculturalism is seen by many as nothing better than tokenism where only a version of multiculturalism, what Ghassan Hage calls “White multiculturalism” is encouraged. Such multiculturalism, derived from the Anglo-centric worldview, either tries to subsume the Aboriginal identity within it or keeps it at bay.

The history of Aboriginal Australia, as constructed by the settlers (that is to say, the historical construction of Aboriginality by the settlers) was always documented as the site on which the success story of the colonizing mission of the settlers stands. The Aborigines were envisioned by the colonizers as nothing better than brutes of the dark world and untutored savages on whom no light of modernity had ever dawned, whereas the settlers themselves were seen as civilizing and providing enlightenment. It is this high-handed attitude that made the White colonizers subordinate the Aborigines (physically, emotionally, psychologically, and culturally) and forcefully persuade them to accept the White cultural worldview. But this practice of making one deliberately forget the bloody history on which the current Australian nation-state thrives, is being re-visited in recent times. The history of colonization is being retold from the perspective of the original inhabitants of the land.

The Aboriginal presence in Australia, which is anthropologically proven, is more than 60,000 years old. This long history encompasses the mythical stories of creation which talk about ‘ancestral’ beings that were believed to have moved across the land and in the process formulated its natural forms, geographical sites, rules, customs and even the language.

The change, nay epistemic violence, which perhaps devastatingly affected them was colonization:

Ever since the white men set foot in Australia more than 200 years ago, they have persecuted, harassed, tormented and tyrannised the people they found there. The more cold-blooded decided that the most humane way of dealing with a galaxy of peoples who would never be able to adapt to the “whitefella” regime was to eliminate them as quickly as possible, so they shot and poisoned them. Others believed that they owed it to their God to rescue the benighted savage, strip him of his pagan culture, clothe his nakedness, and teach him the value of work. Leaving the original inhabitants alone was never an option; learning from them was beyond any notion of what was right and proper. As far as the pink people were concerned, black (sic.) Australians were primitive peoples, survivors from the Stone Age in a land that time forgot. (Germaine Greer: “Worlds Apart” *The Guardian* 03/07/2008)

1.2 THE ABORIGINAL WORLD

1.2.1 ABORIGINAL SOCIETY

Before colonization, there were hundreds of Aboriginal tribes, markedly different from one other, and speaking intricate languages of their own. However, a pan-Aboriginal similarity existed, and there were many features common to most Aboriginal communities. Before colonization, Aboriginal life and social structures were uncomplicated. Fishing, hunting and gathering were their primary occupations. They lived in small community structures, had intricate kinship patterns and also had typical practices. Though marked social hierarchy was absent, the “Elders” of the community were highly respected. Graham Jenkins in his *Conquest of the Ngarrindjeri* makes the following observation about the Ngarrindjeri, which may be said to be true for all the Aboriginal people:

They were a truly a classless society and had reached the apogee as far as refined egalitarian socialism is concerned. Yet if they have to be placed in any European class scale, their mode of life could only be compared with that of the old aristocracy. Their dedication to cultural pursuits – the ballet, music, opera and art; their enjoyment of pomp and ceremony; their strong adherence to ancient codes of chivalry and etiquette; the pleasure they derived from sports and hunting; their great personal courage, pride and independence; their insistence on the right of an initiated man to bear arms and for honour to be honourably defended; their epicurean approach to food; their honest acceptance of human passions and lack of hypocrisy regarding them; these and other aspects of Ngarrindjeri life find distinct parallels in the outlook and way of life of the European aristocracy. The great difference lay in the fact that in Ngarrindjeri society everyone was an aristocrat. The Ngarrindjeri showed the world that it was possible for socialism and the aristocratic life-style to be married harmoniously, and for life to be a rich cultural and creative experience — without servants and without masters. (as cited by Bruce Elder, 245)

Their concept of land ownership was closely associated with their religious practices, closely related to the natural-world, and oriented around the concept called “Dreaming”.

1.2.2 “DREAMTIME” AND “DREAMING”

“Dreaming” is the basic philosophical premise of Aboriginal nature-centric spirituality and “Dreamtime” is that eternal creative phase when the land and its laws were generated by the “ancestral beings” for the Aborigines. part of “Dreaming” is the most important and intrinsic element of Aboriginality. It encompasses a spatio-temporal infinitude, and is a matter of “everywhere and everywhen” (Stanner). It is a vision and philosophical design that connects past to the present, one aspect of nature to another:

A central meaning of ‘The Dreaming’ is that of a sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are; but neither ‘time’ nor ‘history’ as we understand them is involved in this meaning... Although ‘The Dreaming’ conjures the notion of a sacred, heroic time of the infinitely remote past, such a time is also, in a sense, still part of the present. One cannot ‘fix’ ‘The Dreaming’ in time: it was, and

is, everywhen... Clearly, The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man.... It is a cosmogony, an account of the begetting of the universe, a study about creation. It is also a cosmology, an account or theory of how what was created became an ordered system. To be more precise, how the universe became a moral system. (Stanner 23)

It is this connectedness that engenders in the Aborigines a community value and sense of belongingness, a pride about its mythical origin and history. Vicki Grieves rightly mentions: “It is a state of being that includes knowledge, calmness, acceptance and tolerance, balance and focus, inner strength, cleansing and inner peace, feeling whole, an understanding of cultural roots and ‘deep wellbeing’.” The term “Dreaming” was coined by F. Gillen in 1896 and taken up by W.B. Spencer. The word was a translation of the Arrernte phrase *altjirangambakalaon* and the inference was that *altjirarama* stood for “to dream” and had been used to refer to the creative epoch of the Aboriginal world in the religious myths and legends of the Northern Arunta people. Later this “creative epoch” or “Dreamtime” was applied to pan-Aboriginal spiritual belief. This is not to rule out that there are intricate myths ascribed to each Aboriginal community but a degree of sameness in the spiritual insight is to be traced in all.

“Dreamtime” for the Aborigines is the moment of creation when “ancestral beings” as shape-shifters (kangaroo-men, wallaby-women etc.) literally moved across the land. The traces thereby created became permanent geographical contours. They also created man and woman and various laws for men and women to abide by (laws usually pertaining to community and family living, birth, child-rearing, initiation to community after adolescence, marriage, hunting, gathering of food, making tools, punishing offenders, illness and death). When the ancestral beings gradually became tired and when all their work was accomplished, they stopped to rest in the form of land masses. But, they were never dead. Their existence is to be felt through various aspects of nature, the totem to which they are assigned and also through their descendants.

1.2.3 ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND THE LAND

It is through their nature-focused spiritual belief system that the Aborigines have come to consider the land as a part of their essence and existence. Far from being merely a geographical, scientific mass, the land is invested with a definition and dimension that gives spiritual succor and strength to Aboriginal existence. It is the source that provides communion with the ancient law-giving beings of their community. If for the “modern” non-Aboriginal Australian, land is a matter of commodity, an object meant to be brought and sold, for the Aborigines the land owns them. Every aspect of Aboriginal life—physical, spiritual and cultural—is linked to the land on which they live. The land is a breathing site for the Aborigines—a pulsating being, where their ancestors live. Hence, it is the right and duty of the Aborigines to protect their natural cultural sites: Dreaming sites, water holes, and burial grounds.

With colonization and forceful usurpation of the Aboriginal land the traditional attachment between the Aborigines and their land was derecognized by the White Australian nation-state. Today to access the claim to their traditional and customary land, the Aborigines need “native title”—a formal

acknowledgement by the Australian legal system. Beyond legalities the connection to this land is revived by the Aborigines through ceremonial practices: storytelling, song, dance and painting.

Check your progress 1

1. Discuss how “Dreamtime” and the ‘Dreaming’ become the spiritual basis of Aboriginal culture
2. What does the relationship with the land mean to the Aboriginal people?
3. Write a note on the Aboriginal life before the “contact period”.

1.2.4 ABORIGINAL CULTURAL PRACTICES

1.2.4.1 ABORIGINAL PAINTING

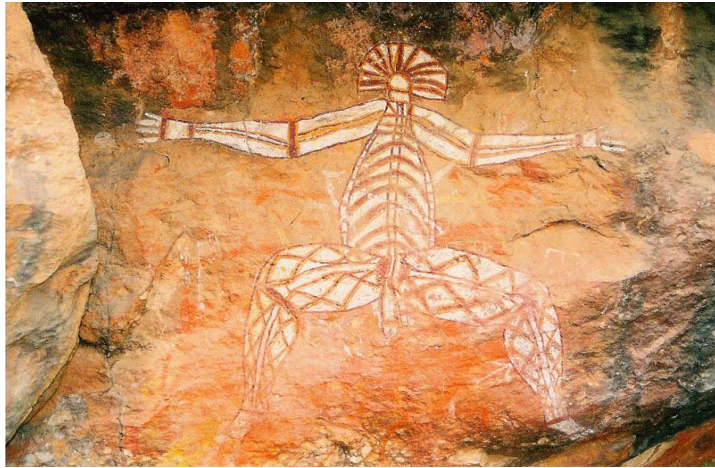
The Aboriginal culture of telling and sharing stories is essentially oral and has been passed down from one generation to another:

Traditionally Aboriginal story telling had many functions, and it still does. It reinforced the Aboriginal people’s ideological beliefs in the Dreamtime – their Creation and other cultural stories of the Rainbow Serpent and their environment. They told of how the rivers and lakes, hills, mountains and plains were formed and why the birds, animals and marine creatures act like they do. These stories tell of how the magpies and crows are deadly enemies and how they came by their colouring; why the kookaburra has a raucous laugh; why the djittidjitti (wagtail) lures children into the bush to become lost and the meaning of other bird calls, animal behaviour and why Aborigines could eat some reptiles and not others...All these stories referred to the Aborigines’ environment or the practices of their everyday life. Children had to listen to their elders and obey them for their survival. In a sense these stories were parables that children learned from, much like the Bible stories in Christian culture. Aboriginal story telling gave information of where the best game and water sources were to be found; where people could venture and where they weren’t permitted to go, such places as sacred sites and where men’s and women’s businesses were conducted that was off-limits to the uninitiated. So storytelling was a learning process – children learnt from an early age how to survive their environment by listening to their elders. (Rosemary van den Berg. “Aboriginal Story Telling and Writing” 1)

Such “Dreamtime” story telling gets pictorially represented through varied Aboriginal art forms. Traditional art in effect is an expression of the “Dreamtime” cosmology and cosmogony. Contrary to many Western art forms “Dreamtime” paintings have philosophical depth and spiritual profundity. Generally thought of as incomprehensible, Dreamtime art is representative of a culture that is alogical (not centred on logical thought), untranslatable and is thereby closely guarded, immutable and “boundary-maintained”². The basis of the art forms are “Dreamtime” myth stories encrypted through hieroglyphics. Educative in nature these paintings are visual books by one generation for the next. What today is found on canvas were meant to be etched on rock walls, sand, ceremonial articles and bodies of the members of the community—all being emblems of a mythical, mystical past of the Aboriginal people.

The modern Aboriginal art movement began in 1971 with the efforts of Geoffrey Brandon—an art instructor in a school. Brandon encouraged Aboriginal children to paint the Dreamtime stories of their

community as murals on the exteriors of the school wall. Contemporary Aboriginal art is a platform to reach out to the world to proudly showcase the connectedness of the Aborigines to the land, a hope to reclaim identity.



Aboriginal ‘X-Ray’ style figure. Rock Painting. 6000 B.C. Kakadu National Park. Northern Territory, Australia.

1.2.4.2 CORROBOREE

Corroboree—another traditional Aboriginal way to connect to the land, ancestral spiritual beings, and “Dreamtime”—was thought to be practised by the “spiritual beings” of “Dreamtime” and gradually handed down by them to singers and dancers of a community. Corroboree, celebrating creational myths, is a kind of a mime with story, song, dances and music. The songs narrate the stories of ‘Dreamtime’ and are passed from one generation to the next orally. Performed on special occasions, Corroborees

are the non-secret rituals performed in the camp at night, before an enthusiastic audience of men, women and children. A group of adult men, seated around a small fire, will chant one or another of the ancient songs, while others, their bodies decorated with symbols, portray, in a series of spectacular dances, the incidents in the myth. (“Aboriginal Australian Art & Culture Centre—Alice Spring.”)

Corroboree songs are supposed to be owned by “Songmen” who also are the owners and keepers of the land. Thus, corroboree songs, as well as the accompanying dances, are closely related to the land and are typical to every clan. Talking about the theme of such corroboree songs Will Seachnasaish makes the following note in *The Didjeridu Dharpa: Songs of the Dreamtime*:

The subjects of many aboriginal songs are deeply imbedded in their belief system concerning the origins of the world they call Wangar— a time in the very distant past when spirit forms existed and gave shape to the cosmos. There are songs that correspond to this dreamtime epoch and are songs that are totemic, paying homage to the spirit, animal, and plant worlds. The subjects of their songs are also property of the moiety (complex structured social groups). Each moiety has the responsibility to know what subjects are of importance and thus use the appropriate words that reflect their focus for each song. Many songs also pertain to actions carried out during certain

seasons such as collecting wild honey, fruits, and nuts, or perhaps to cosmological icons such as the moon or stars. (2)



WR Thomas, “A South Australian Corroboree”, 1864, Art Gallery of South Australia

However, as we would later note, the themes of such corroborees (both song and the accompanying dance) changed in the contact period and the recent neo-colonial condition. The themes and styles of corroboree performances became more resistive and appropriative towards White settler culture.

Check your progress 2

1. Discuss the significance of paintings and corroborees in Aboriginal culture.

1.2.3 COLONIZATION, FRONTIER HISTORY AND THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

One of the earliest contacts of the Aboriginal people with the foreign world was with the Macassans from Sulawesi islands in east Indonesia. The relationship was based on trade and economics. The Macassans came in search of ‘trepanng’ or sea-cucumber and in turn offered the people of the Yolngu tribe, metal knives, cloth and tobacco. Later the Spanish, Dutch and the French arrived on the coast of Australia. But it was with the arrival and settlement of the British that the Aboriginal ways of life experienced shocking change. The coming of Captain Arthur Phillip along with his “first fleet” changed the history of Australia. The two polarized cultures met: the Aboriginal people (otherwise peaceful, benign and with respect for land) and the Englishmen (products of industrialized, modern, progressive, competitive, aggressive world for whom the new found land was a matter of new found property to be explored and exploited).

However, the initial exchanges (as noted in various journal entries) between the two worlds were rather amicable. But, as soon as the Whites, with total disregard for the Aboriginal concept of reciprocity and sharing, started to fell the trees, clear the grounds and fence the land, the Aboriginal people reacted with rage. Not only did the Whites disregard Aboriginal friendship on Aboriginal land, but also exploited natural resources and granted no access to the Aborigines to the White man’s resources. Aboriginal resistance was initially that of an inconsistent kind— based on guerrilla techniques of stealing food, provisions, clothes, and tools and stealthily killing or wounding the settlers. But faced with the modern ammunitions of the settlers, such “primitive” techniques were of

no avail. Gradually the Whites expanded and strengthened their settlement. Moreover, along with them the Whites brought diseases which the Aborigines contracted. Institutionalized killing of Aborigines were carried out by British military to encroach upon their land. The smallest of Aboriginal resistance led to the plunder and decimation of the entire tribe.

However, if colonization openly attempted “White-washing” of the Aborigines, then State promoted agendas like, ‘Protection’, ‘Assimilation’, ‘Integration’, and ‘Multiculturalism’ adopted a more ideologically conditioned and sophisticated approach to carry further the complete obliteration of the Aboriginal peoples.

1.4 THE WHITE NATION-STATE’S POLICIES AND THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

1.4.1 PROTECTION

The White European settlers not only denied the Aboriginal people any recognition of their own law, but also introduced a new legal system, about which the Aboriginal people had no understanding, with the intention of subjugating them. To stop the Aboriginal forays against European settlement (that now comprised of sheep stations and agricultural lands) a subtle tact called "Aboriginal Protection Act, 1869" (first enacted in Victoria and later implemented in a modified version across Australia) was adopted. It was the newest method to control the lives of the Aboriginal people in terms of their residence, their employment, marriage and even social lives. The “Aborigines Protection Act 1909” was “An Act to provide for the protection and care of aborigines; to repeal the *Supply of Liquors to Aborigines Prevention Act*; to amend the *Vagrancy Act, 1902*, and the *Police Offences (Amendment) Act, 1908*; and for purposes consequent thereon or incidental thereto.” It formally institutionalized the “Aborigines Protection Board” (already existing since 1881), with legal powers to “provide for the protection and care of Aborigines.” Although every age group of Aboriginal society came under the Board it was precisely meant for the Aboriginal children who could be now legally removed from their community to be placed under the protection of the Board. This was the beginning of a process that created the “Stolen Generation” children. Further, the Act defined as to who were the Aborigines: "Every aboriginal native of Australia and every aboriginal half-caste or child of a half-caste, such half-caste or child habitually associating and living with aboriginals". The Act was consequently amended in 1915, 1918, 1936, 1940, 1943 and 1963. It was repealed by the “Aborigines Act 1969”.

1.4.2 ASSIMILATION

Assimilation as a cultural hegemonic practice was carried out by the Whites in Australia from the very beginning of colonisation. The main objective of the colonizers was to render Australia ‘White’ in every sense of the term, and not merely racially. In State sponsored missionary schools, the Aboriginal children were made to learn English, Arithmetic, and ideas of morality. An 1835 statement by Governor Gawler in Adelaide (South Australia) expresses a similar intention: “Black men, we wish to make you happy but you cannot be happy unless you imitate white men. Build huts, wear clothes and be useful...You cannot be happy unless you love God...love white men...learn to speak English...” (qtd. in R. Broome 27).

However, in the 1930s “Assimilation” fully became a part of colonial ideology and was adopted as an official government policy in the 1950s. The White cultural majority wanted to subsume the identity of the Aboriginal people within their codes of cultural standards. In 1951, the Federal Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck was instrumental in driving hard the policy of “Assimilation”—a policy that was not likely to yield any positive results for the Aborigines. This “paternalistic”, “protective” policy, where Whites were “only trying to help” the Aboriginal people, was far from anything good. It ghettoized the Aboriginal people as poor fringe dwellers (with no proper jobs or employment) in the cities. Racism and segregation was widespread and the Aborigines were debarred from hotels, bars, cinemas and other public recreational spaces. Before the 1940s, Aboriginal people were not allowed any citizenship rights, however after the Second World War, they could apply for rights. Again, when a certificate of citizenship was issued, an Aboriginal person had to give up every relationship with his/her community and even his/her family. Such a certificate in New South Wales was dubbed as an “exemption certificate”—an exemption from Aboriginal heritage. This allowed an Aboriginal person to freely mingle in the White society and take all decisions about their life without any association with their family or friends.



Studio Portrait “Aboriginal Woman in White Jacket.” (1865) Australasian Art Collection by Stephen E. Nixon.

No wonder such certificates were looked down upon by majority of Aboriginal people and labelled as “dog licences”. In 1961 the Native Welfare Conference explained assimilation in the following manner:

All Aborigines and part-Aborigines are expected to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.

However, things did not work as per the expectation of the White community and hence at the 1965 Native Welfare Conference, assimilation was re-defined :

The policy of Assimilation seeks that all persons of Aboriginal descent will choose to attain a similar manner and standard of living to that of other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community.

However, the policy finally failed - not only because the White nation was not accommodative and appreciative enough towards the Aboriginal people, but also because the Aboriginal people resisted such a policy aimed at destroying their culture.

1.4.3 INTEGRATION

The cultural hegemony and arrogance inherent in the assimilationist policies of the Australian nation-state, were ameliorated towards integrationism at the “Native Welfare Conference” of 1965. From the notion that Aboriginal people ‘must adopt the same’ manners and standard of living as was followed by White Australia, the concept changed to Aboriginal people having the option to ‘choose to attain a similar manner and standard of living’ as was followed by White Australia. In this apparent and cosmetic shift from assimilation to integration the purpose of the White nation remained the same — absorption into the dominant, mainstream, Eurocentric culture. As with assimilationism, national unity was still the desired result, and “Integration” was merely another means to achieve that end (Lopez 60). What was perhaps most broadly evident was the manner of this integration policy. If previously in the assimilationist phase the onus and responsibility to merge with the White culture remained with the Aboriginal people, then in the integrationist phase Government recognized that it was not merely the State and the Aboriginal population, but the broader Australian White community who had to accommodate the Aboriginal people. According to Billy Snedden, integration implied and required the willingness on the part of the dominant community to move towards minority groups, just as it required them to move towards the White. However, what remained unchanged is the project of building a homogenous White nation: “[t]hose of different ethnic origin must integrate and unite into our own community so that it will become a single Australian community” (Snedden qtd. In Markus *Race* 17).



1.4.4 MULTICULTURALISM

The third and most recent policy aimed at creating a White nation in Australia is “Multiculturalism”. “Multiculturalism”—a vision that promised to celebrate plurality in society—was adopted as a policy by the Labour Federal Government in 1973. However, the policy has been widely criticized as being no better than promoting a new ideology of the White Australian melting pot. In so far as Australian “Multiculturalism” was a policy for “managing the consequences of cultural diversity” in the interest of the individual and society as a whole (*National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia: Sharing our Future* vii), it was aptly criticized as a conservative perspective “aimed at the Anglo-Australian ruling class, reassuring them that cultural minorities will not be allowed to threaten their material superordination” (Stratton 163). Curthoys comments that multicultural discourse is notably silent as to the colonial features of current Australian life (34). Aborigines who had been hitherto colonized, dispossessed, exploited, institutionalized and even museumized within the White nation frame were further rendered through “Multiculturalism” nothing better than one among many ethnic groups. It acted as an oblique racial tool to negate the long due recognition of the Aborigine’s identity as the Indigenous resident and their tormented experiences of colonization.

Many Aboriginal Australians have attacked “Multiculturalism” on the account of creating an equality which “reduces them to the status of just another ethnic minority” (Bulbeck 273). Rosemary van den Berg’s concern with Aborigines being considered “only another ethnic group” is that white Australians will be given the status as the “real Australians” (*Nyoongar* 162). Many Aboriginal people vehemently object to hypotheses that Aborigines crossed from Asia to Australia in dugout canoes in the Ice Age, and some believe they are contrived to discount the timelessness of Aboriginal habitation in this land. If people from various countries migrated to Australia (at one time or another), then Aboriginal people would have no basis for claims that they are owners of the land. According

to Toogarr (Jerry) Morrison, one of van den Berg’s interviewees in her study of Nyoongar perspectives of multiculturalism,

Racism still exists. Because of government policies in trying to let people of Australia believe we all arrived here from overseas and that we are all equal in that context. The High Court rules out terra nullius, but the governments do not want to listen. (qtd. in van den Berg, *Nyoongar* 3)

Check your progress 3

Explain the Australian policy of ‘Multiculturalism’ and its impact on the lives of the Aboriginal people.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this particular Unit we have tried to understand Aboriginal life and cultural practices, from the earliest times though colonization to the current multicultural condition of Australia. The beginnings of Aboriginal history (where “history” is a discipline that is documented and canonized by the Whites) is to be found not only in archaeological sites but in the myths and folklore of the Aborigines. Such myths together create their spiritual “Dreamtime”—a basis from which springs the essential Aboriginal culture. However, such pristine culture was vilified post their contact with the White colonizers. Not only did the colonizers dismiss the Aboriginal ownership of the land by declaring it as “terra nullius” but even culturally colonized them. Through various policies like “Protection”, “Assimilation”, “Integration” and even “Multiculturalism” the White Australia at various phases tried to erase Aboriginal identity and existence.

1.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

Q.1. How was Aboriginal culture impacted by colonization?

Q.2 How did various government sanctioned policies impact on the living conditions of the Aboriginal people?

1.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

“Aboriginal Australian Art & Culture Centre—Alice Spring.” Web. 03 January 2016.

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15.9 GLOSSARY

1. Deterritorialize: This term was coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972). It means how modern capitalist trends have caused man to be uprooted from his place of origin. This removal of subjects from their original cultural spaces do have a huge schizophrenic impact on the subject's psyche.
2. Boundary-maintained: The term was coined by Fredrick Barth in "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries". Critic and anthropologist Barth believed that ethnic identities are maintained within and across cultural boundaries of the ethnic communities though negotiations, selective exclusions and acceptances of various cultural ideas.

UNIT 16 ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA: FROM RESISTANCE TO RECONCILIATION

Structure

- 16.0 Objectives
 - 16.1 Introduction
 - 16.2 Frontier conflict
 - 16.3 Activism, strikes, protests
- 16.4 1967 Referendum
- 16.4 Land rights and “The Tent Embassy”
- 16.5 Aboriginal organizations
- 16.6 “The Mabo Case” and “The Native Title Act”
- 16.7 “Bringing them Home Report”
- 16.8 Reconciliation
- 16.9 Let us sum up
- 16.10 Unit end Questions
- 16.11 Suggested Readings

16.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to discuss with you the Aboriginal responses to European culture, politics and nation making strategies for more than 200 years following settlement in Australia. The Aboriginal nations suffered extreme trauma during this encounter with the White colonial settlers, when their land was ruthlessly and mercilessly usurped, their children stolen, their women raped, their members slaughtered and their culture decimated. Even in the more recent neocolonial period, the White community failed to give the Aboriginal peoples the respect and rights due to them in their own land and have treated the Aborigines just as another community among many in a multicultural land. The Aboriginal people never accepted such exploitation and humiliation quietly - from the very beginning of the European occupation, they had been protesting in their own ways. Activism and protest, resistance and reaction were most conspicuous - there was no single reactionary tactic followed by the Aborigines and their responses were based on situations, and circumstances. The discourse of ‘Reconciliation’ is a more recent occurrence in the shared history of the Whites and the Aboriginal peoples in Australia.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

Following the first European landing, the settlers moved further away from the Botany Bay area into the interior of the continent, in search of land. Broome speaks of this rapidly growing frontier expansion as a “fantastic land grab which was never again to be equaled” (37). But, this also called for

an expulsion of the Aborigines from their own land—a sacred site that determined their identity. The Aborigines reacted to the process of colonial expansion by openly fighting with the settlers, conducting ambush raids, stealing their livestock and attacking their homesteads. They either openly fought with them or conducted ambush attacks or stole their livestock and attacked their homesteads. The Europeans, their property threatened, brutally reacted towards these moves of the Aborigines. What followed were unnamable atrocities towards the Aborigines: murder, plunder, pillage, rape. Pat Dudgeon *et al* remark:

Aboriginal fighting and warfare skills were small in scale because there had never been the need to engage in large-scale military tactics. The Europeans had guns, horses and organised military forces, and with this superior advantage they won the war for the land. Historical accounts of Aboriginal resistance to colonisation have only emerged in recent years (Broome, 1994; Reynolds, 1999). There has been a recent proliferation of significant texts that include detailed accounts of Aboriginal resistances and warfare (Lowe, 1994). Military analyses of frontier warfare between Aboriginal people and the British (Conner, 2002) have been complemented by local histories with an Aboriginal perspective such as the work of Howard Pedersen and Banjo Woorunmurra (1995), *Jandamarra and the Bunuba Resistance*. (29)

However, Aboriginal resistance which earlier consisted mostly of dispersed and comparatively unorganized attacks, became more organized in the early twentieth century, through activism and representations, strikes and protests. In 1967 “The Referendum” forced a change in the Constitution that now counted the Aborigines in the census. This was followed by the Aboriginal struggle for the right to vote and land rights, “The Tent Embassy” and formation of various Aboriginal organizations that sought Aboriginal self-determination. It was with the “Bringing them Home Report” and “Mabo” that formal Apology from Australian government ensued and an attempt towards reconciliation between the settler community and the Aboriginal peoples started.

2.2 FRONTIER CONFLICT

Most of the frontier conflict in the early period between the White colonizers and the Aborigines was not of an open battle kind. Rather, ambushes and guerilla tactics were adopted by the Aborigines to fight the atrocities of the white settlers. One stark example of an open battle was that fought at Battle Mountain at Queensland in 1884, between the Kalkadoon warriors and the white settlers. As a reaction to the atrocities of the white station supervisor, the Kalkadoon people under the leadership of Mahony decided to openly confront the whites. However, the Kalkadoon boomerangs and spears were no match for the guns and pistols of the settlers, and finally more than 200 Kalkadoon warriors were killed.

The other war rarely mentioned in the history of the Australian frontier conflict is “The Twenty Nine Year War”. The Thungatti Aboriginal people of the Falls country in New South Wales fought a war that lasted for twenty nine years (1828-1853). This caused the death of more than one thousand Thungatti people and thus destroyed almost one third of their population.

An Aboriginal warrior, who has almost become an iconic figure, is the Noongar Yagan. Yagan became an image of resistance to the white colonizers in the Perth area of Western Australia. When the colonizers started fencing off huge masses of land, the Aboriginal people of this area found

themselves facing a shortage of food and being denied access to their traditional hunting grounds and sacred sites. Yagan and his troops led various guerilla forays into white settler farms and broke into white settlements. They also practised firestick farming and often set the bush on fire, which caused a threat to the settler crops and houses. Yagan was later beheaded by the Whites and his head was sent to London as an anthropological curiosity. Yagan's burial site in London was identified much later in 1993 and his remains exhumed and sent to Australia. Various other Aboriginal groups carried out ambush attacks and surprise attacks by night, like Yagan and his troops. Henry Reynolds in *The Other Side of the Frontier* asserts that such Aboriginal attacks were "well-planned, based on good intelligence and timed to allow for the strike and return before dawn" (100).

Check your progress 1

Write a note critically estimating the history of frontier conflict in Australia.

2.3 ACTIVISM, STRIKES, PROTESTS

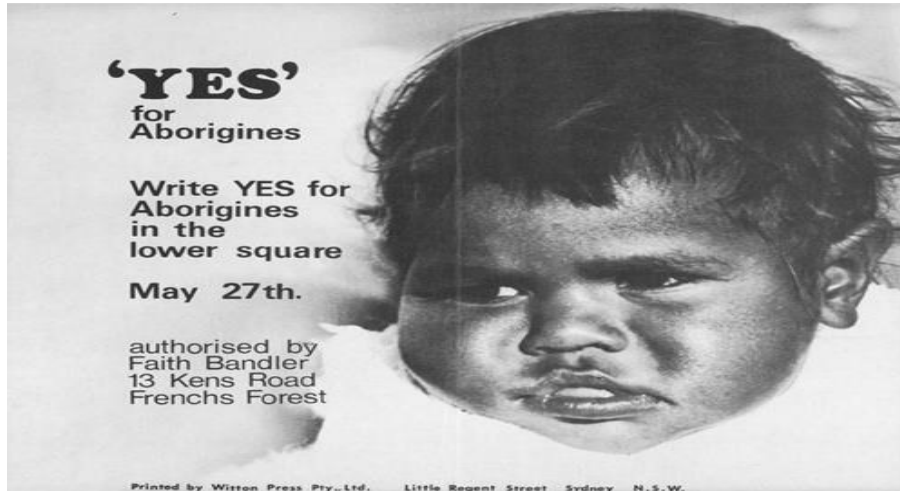
Influenced by the Black movements in the U.S., Fred Maynard formed the "Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association" (AAPA) in 1924 in New South Wales. It was an all-Aboriginal body that organized rallies and public meetings, wrote letters and petitions and ensured adequate newspaper coverage of all activities aimed at promoting the basic rights of Aborigines. Similarly, the "Aborigines Progressive Association" (APA), was formed in 1937 in New South Wales. They organized the Day of Mourning protest on Australia Day in 1938 (on 26th January 1938 when the 150th anniversary of the landing of the first fleet of British settlers at Botany Bay was being celebrated). The APA had three aims: "full citizenship rights for Aboriginal Australians, Aboriginal representation in Parliament and abolition of the New South Wales Aborigines' Protection Board" ("Collaborating for Indigenous Rights n.pg.").

In 1936, the Torres Strait Islanders working on company boats went on a strike, protesting against the hardships experienced under the 'Aboriginal Protection Act'. This non-violent strike finally led to the 'Torres Strait Islanders Act, 1939', and the Torres Strait Islanders being considered different from the Aborigines of the mainland. After 1940s certain state governments did give citizenship rights to the Aborigines with a condition that the Aborigines would have nothing to do with their traditional life, family or community. One of the many significant steps towards Aboriginal self-determination and demand for the 'stolen land' was the formation of the first national organization for the Aboriginal people, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines, later rechristened as the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). The organisation's monumental work lay in its pivotal role in bringing about the success of the 1967 referendum.

2.4 1967 REFERENDUM

On 27 May 1967, the Australian Government amended sections of the Australian Constitution relating to the rights of Aboriginal Australia. The change resulted in the inclusion of the Aboriginal people in the Australian census and also enabled the Commonwealth to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The amended Constitution said that the colonies would retain their

powers to make laws concerning the Aboriginal people within their territory, including those laws that discriminated against them. Hence, the Constitution prohibited the Federal government from making any laws pertaining to the Aboriginal people. It was, thus, expected that better laws could be provided to protect the Aborigines. Ninety percent of the voters said yes (90.77%) and this was a clear mandate in favour of the Aborigines.



Check your progress 2

1. What role did the 1967 Referendum play in promoting the rights of the Aboriginal people?

2.5 LAND RIGHTS AND TENT EMBASSY

Damien Short says: “On Australia Day 1972, four Aboriginal activists ... travelled to Canberra to establish the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in protest at their continuing dispossession and severely disadvantaged status.” (493) These four men planted a beach umbrella as an insignia of the Aboriginal Embassy. It was established in response to the Government’s dismissal of the pleas to recognize Aboriginal Land Rights. This Aboriginal Tent Embassy is a semi-permanent set up, on the lawns of the Old Parliament House of Canberra, that asserts Aboriginal rights but has no state / legal validity. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy presented a list of demands from their newly founded headquarters:

- Control of the Northern Territory as a State within the Commonwealth of Australia; the Parliament in the Northern Territory to be predominantly Aboriginal with title and mining rights to all land within the Territory.
- Legal title and mining rights to all other presently existing reserve lands and settlements throughout Australia.
- The preservation of all sacred sites throughout Australia.
- Legal title and mining rights to areas in and around all Australian capital cities.
- Compensation money for lands not returnable to take the form of a down-payment of six billion dollars and an annual percentage of the gross national income. (“The Bush capital” n.pg.)

The demands were rejected, police moved in and eight people were arrested from the site. With a greater number of people in 1972 the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was reformed. From then on the Aboriginal tent embassy has come to represent the anger, protest, resistance, hope and aspiration of the Aboriginal people in Australia.

2.6 ABORIGINAL ORGANIZATIONS

In the process of Aboriginal self-determination a number of organizations were founded that promoted the Aboriginal cause for land rights, health, security, legal rights, education, economic well-being etc. The most prominent ones were:

Aboriginal Legal Service (to protect the Aboriginal rights against victimization); Aboriginal Medical Service (to address the health issues of the Aboriginal people); Aboriginal Progress Association (a group of Aboriginal political activists); Aboriginal Australian Fellowship (working for social and legislative reforms for the Aboriginal people); Abschol (a national union of Aboriginal students of various universities); Anti-Slavery Society (abolition of all forms of slavery to which the Aboriginal people were subjected);



Australian Aborigines' League (an organization looking into the Indigenous Australians' full citizens' rights and equality); Cairns Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advancement League (an organization that played an active role in the federal movement); Council for Aboriginal Affairs (an organisation that encouraged Aboriginal leadership and supported the protection of Indigenous cultures in various ways); Council for Aboriginal Rights (organisation guided by the 1948 United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights); Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI: meant to press for greater Commonwealth involvement in Aboriginal affairs and to work for the removal of discriminatory state legislation); Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs (a massive fundraising appeal in 1964 by the organization, helped

realise the vision of meeting rooms, a gymnasium, counselling services, adult education, a hostel and short-term accommodation).

2.7 “THE MABO CASE” AND “THE NATIVE TITLE ACT”

One of the most historical milestones in the movement for Aboriginal self-determination is “The Mabo Case”. In 1982, Edward Koki Mabo, along with fellow Mer Islanders (the Reverend Dave Passi, Celuia Salee and James Rice) filed a case in the High Court. Ten years later, in 1992, a judgement—most historic in its ramifications—was passed. Ruling in favour of the Meriam people (Eastern Torres Strait), the High Court held that the former had the right, possession, use, occupancy over their traditional land and the same should be protected by the laws of the State. The judgement opened thus:

In the result, six members of the Court (Dawson J. dissenting) are in agreement that the common law of this country recognizes a form of native title which, in the cases where it has not been extinguished, reflects the entitlement of the indigenous inhabitants, in accordance with their laws or customs, to their traditional lands and that, subject to the effect of some particular Crown leases, the land entitlement of the Murray Islanders in accordance with their laws or customs is preserved, as native title, under the law of Queensland. (“Mabo vs. Queensland.” 1-2)

Although by the time the judgement was passed both Celuia Mapo Salee and Eddie Mabo had died, such a historic judgement came to overturn the doctrine of *terra nullius* (no recognizable Indigenous land before the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1788). There were more to the decision. The court decision showed that:

the people who were in occupation of these Islands before first European contact and who have continued to occupy those Islands to the present day are known as the Meriam people;

although outsiders, relatively few in number, have lived on the Murray Islands from time to time and worked as missionaries, government officials, or fishermen, there has not been a permanent immigrant population;

anthropological evidence showed that the present inhabitants of the Islands were descended from the people in occupation at sovereignty;

... since annexation an Island Court, the Island Council, a police force and other government agencies have been introduced to the Islands. Land disputes were dealt with by the Island Court in accordance with the custom of the Meriam people. Thus, even in cases where there may have been an absence of a law to determine a point in contest between rival claimants, such a contest was capable of being determined according to the Meriam people’s laws and customs. (“Overturning the Doctrine” 3-4)

Such a judgement pressurized the government to pass a new land dealing with new land rights called the “Native Title Act 1993”. On the other hand, the Government also assured the non-Aboriginals of

Australia that there was nothing to fear from the native title decision and that it was a step towards Reconciliation between the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal. The law, which was amended from time to time keeping in mind the State's agenda of Aboriginal self-determination, made provision for the Aborigines where their native title was reduced or wiped out. "By the end of 2007, various courts across Australia had recognized 74 native title claims, covering a total area of 785686 square kilometers, with a total of 508 applications still active" (Pascoe *et al.* 118) What might apparently seem a recognition of a right to the non-Aboriginals, in actuality, native title is the fundamental recognition of the cultural identity of the Aboriginal people—the first people of Australia.

Check your progress 3

1. Write a short note on Aboriginal land right movement and the Tent Embassy.

2.8 “Bringing them Home Report”

As already mentioned earlier, a generation of Aboriginal children (mostly half-blooded, i.e. of part Aboriginal parentage) were forcefully seized and stolen from their families and communities to assimilate culturally in various missions and Protection centers. The exact number of children thus removed will never be known, but the effect of this atrocity had scathing traumatic effects, and left an indelible mark on the first world nation. This assimilationist policy has directly or obliquely affected each and every member of the existing Aboriginal community. This sudden separation, had adverse effect on children not only psychologically but even culturally. Not only were the children trained amidst harsh brutalities to adopt western ways but also were made to forget their language, cultural practices and religion. Most of these children grew up without the love and affection of the family members; and thus being away from the family, when these children grew up into adulthood did not know the ways to manage their own families. In response to the efforts made by various Aboriginal bodies, agencies and organizations an inquiry (The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry) was established by the federal Attorney-General, Michael Lavarch, on 11 May 1995. The 680-page report (primarily conducted by Sir Ronald Wilson, President of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, and Mick Dodson, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner) was tabled in Federal Parliament on 26 May 1997. This major step towards reconciliation was named “Bringing them Home Report”—an inquiry report into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from their families. The report concluded that “indigenous families and communities have endured gross violations of their human rights. These violations continue to affect indigenous people's daily lives. They were an act of genocide, aimed at wiping out indigenous families, communities, and cultures, vital to the precious and inalienable heritage of Australia” (*Bringing them Home*). As an outcome of the Report an organization call “Link-Up” was created, to help reunite broken families.

2.9 RECONCILIATION

It is from the disturbing findings of the Report that a need for formal apology arose. Such an apology, it was clear, would help to consolidate the efforts of reconciliation— in restoring harmonious relationship between the two communities and healing the fracture between the two worlds. However the primary initiative towards such reconciliation was taken up by the Whites acknowledging the

mistakes and atrocities done to the Aborigines and promising that such an action would not be repeated in the future. Reconciliation also acknowledged the forceful manner in which the lands of the Aborigines were seized, their religion and culture debilitated. “Bob Hawke, Australian Prime Minister from 1983-1991, made a promise, following a second bark petition presented to the Commonwealth Parliament, that his government would work a treaty or compact. The government established the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) in 1991 and it operated for ten years to promote reconciliation and advise the government on formal ways by which reconciliation could be achieved.” (Prescoe 124) Some other reconciliatory efforts are being carried by ANTaR (Australians for Native Title and reconciliation) and RA (Reconciliation Australia). There had been marches and gatherings, congregations and seminars expressing a desire for reconciliation.

However, all don't feel in the same way about reconciliation. Some non-Indigenous people believe that whatever atrocities were committed on the Aborigines were not done by the present generation and hence the onus of apology does not lie with them, nor any conscious efforts of reconciliation.

Check your progress 4

1. How was the “Bringing them Home Report” important in the process of reconciliation

2.9.1 THE APOLOGY

Also known as the “Sorry Day”, 13 February 2008 saw non-Indigenous Australia acknowledge its mistakes and formally apologize to Aboriginal Australia. The Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the leader of Opposition, Brendan Nelson, offered an apology to the Stolen Generations and the same was almost unanimously supported by the House of Representatives. Thousands of people gathered on the lawns of the Parliament to listen to this historic event. Other followed it on the television. Kevin Rudd in a speech that was most emotional and genuine expressed a deep-felt shame and sorrow on behalf of all the non-Indigenous population of Australia:

To the stolen generations, I say the following : as Prime Minister of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the government of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the Parliament of Australia, I am sorry. I offer you this apology without qualification. We apologise for the hurt, the pain and suffering that we, the parliament, have caused you by the laws that previous parliaments have enacted. We apologise for the indignity, the degradation and the humiliation these laws embodied. We offer this apology to the mothers, the fathers, the brothers, the sisters, the families and the communities whose lives were ripped apart by the actions of successive governments under successive parliaments. In making this apology, I would also like to speak personally to the members of the stolen generations and their families: to those here today, so many of you; to those listening across the nation – from Yuendumu, in the central west of the Northern Territory, to Yabara, in North Queensland, and to Pitjantjatjara in South Australia.

2.10 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have tried to make an assessment of the important occurrences in the history of Aboriginal Australia pertaining to resistance and reconciliation. If resistance to the colonial contact

was an early response of Aboriginal Australia to the more vigorous and atrocious forces of settler colony, then a more recent day approach is reconciliation—a reconciliation whose basis is the acknowledgement of guilt by the non-Indigenous community. A thorough understanding of both resistance and reconciliation would help us understand the responses of Aboriginal Australia to the effects of colonization.

2.11 UNIT END QUESTION

Analyse the significance of the Apology speech of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

2.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 17 THE ABORIGINAL NOVEL AND KIM SCOTT

Structure

- 17.0 Objectives
 - 17.1 Introduction
 - 17.2 Dreamtime storytelling
 - 17.3 Aboriginal novelists: an introduction
 - 17.4 Kim Scott: an introduction
 - 17.4.1 *True Country*
 - 17.4.2 *That Deadman Dance*
- 17.5 Let us sum up
- 17.6 Unit end questions
- 17.7 Kim Scott – selected publications and speeches
- 17.8 Suggested Readings

17.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this Unit are:

- to discuss the evolution and growth of the Australian Aboriginal novel and
- to locate the position of the Aboriginal writer Kim Scott within the tradition of the Aboriginal novel.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

Storytelling, an ancient and ingrained Aboriginal practice that reaffirms Aboriginal identity in the Dreamtime continuum, formed the primary basis to Aboriginal novel writing. Such stories that were meant to exhort, educate and entertain found a new lease of life through the appropriation of Western modes of alphabet, language and literature. One of the primary and important written documentation of such story telling was perhaps David Unaipion's "Legendary Tales of the Aborigines" (1930). Colin Johnson's (Mudrooroo) *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) was long considered to be the first Aboriginal novel. However, the controversy regarding the identity of Mudrooroo has made Monica Clare's posthumously published novel *Karobran* (1978) the pioneering work in Aboriginal novel writing. These novels and the host of other Aboriginal novels that followed talked primarily about the re-inscribing of Aboriginal identity in the midst of White colonization or neo-colonization. Kim Scott entered the scene of Aboriginal novel writing in 1993 with his *True Country*. His second novel *Benang: From the Heart* was published in 1999. In 2010 Scott published *That Deadman Dance*, a novel that talks about the cross-cultural relationships between the Whites and the Aborigines.

Adam Shoemaker in his *Black Words White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988* is of the opinion that: "in the case of Aboriginal creative writing, the literature and actual events are very proximate: novels are extremely naturalistic... In short, black creative writing in Australia cannot be studied in

isolation: it must be examined and evaluated in terms of the social environment which surrounds it and the historical events which precede it.” (6). Hence, the Aboriginal novel is a definite outcome of the socio-politico-cultural-economic condition in which the Aboriginal people are located. However, the Aboriginal attempt at writing the novel—an essentially European cultural practice—has its roots in the Aboriginal people’s practice of narrating Dreamtime stories. Such stories are recounted by the older generation for the younger ones. These are the stories of the land, sky, river (that is to say ever sacred natural sites), spiritual and mythical beliefs, language, kinship, history, epistemological system maintenance through practical skills and formation of traditional rules that are to be observed. Such dialogic discourse narratives, where stories are set in a site that involves both the speaker and the respondent, involve not only verbal communication but even non-verbal elements (such as gestures, dance, and paintings) and thereby incorporate the entire gamut of the socio-cultural existence of the Aborigines.

In due course and following contact with the colonial culture, the story telling practice that was oral went alphabetic. Aborigines appropriated the novel writing style and also tried hard to retain the traditional ethos of storytelling practice. Catherine Langloh Parker published *Aboriginal Legendary Tales* (1896)—a set of mythical dreamtime stories by a group of Aborigines. This was followed by David Unaipon’s “Legendary Tales of the Aborigines” (1930) (although only very recently was Unaipon given the credit of authorship for the tales). There are other Aboriginal tales, myths and collections of stories (viz. by Paddy Roe, Bill Neidjie, Leonie Karmeret *al*) that appeared from time to time. Yet, what we understand as a full formed Aboriginal novel came through Mudrooroo. Although, his Aboriginal identity has become a matter of disconcerting debate, yet his influence from the mid-60s on the practice of Aboriginal novel writing, was never to be undermined. Other novels of renown include Archie Weller’s *Day of the Dog* (1981) that deals with the author’s reminiscence of people and events during his youthful days in East Perth, John MukMuk Burke’s *Bridge of Triangles* (1994) and Herb Wharton’s *Unbranded* (1992). All these novels did show a common concern on the thematic front and rightly Elizabeth Webby observes:

They called for justice and land rights, challenged racist stereotypes, dismantled exclusionary models of national identity, and corrected biased historical narratives of progress and peaceful settlement. They also insisted on the continuity of the past and present. Not only had the past left indelible scars on the present, new wrongs were being perpetrated against Aboriginal Australians every day. (29)

Another aspect of such novels was a strong element of autobiography. From the stylistic point of view these novels fused Aboriginal language with English. Some of them in their attempt to incorporate Aboriginal dreamtime elements in their novels, rendered them magic realist. One such novel was Kim Scott’s *True Country*. An ardent follower of Rushdie, the magic realist style is also evident in his internationally acclaimed second novel *Benang* (1999). *Benang* is a novel that attempts to rewrite history like Mudrooroo’s *Long Live Sandawarra* (1979) and *Master of Ghost Dreaming* (1991). Scott’s *Kayang and Me* (2005) is a part-novel and dialogic storytelling venture along with Aboriginal Elder Hazel Brown. In 2010, Scott published his latest novel *That Deadman Dance*. Hence, in this Unit we will try to focus on how modern Aboriginal novel writing that evolved from Dreamtime stories went a long way to become a tool of resistance literature. Aboriginal fiction, that began with translated works of Unaipon (transcribing the mythical tales into the colonizer’s language) through hybridization and appropriation of the master narratives in the more recent works, has

eventually been an attempt at resistance and re-narration, subversion and identity reclamation, politicization and self-assertion.

3.2 DREAMTIME STORYTELLING

Dreamtime stories, as has been already mentioned, had a huge impact on the formation of Aboriginal novels. Such stories were not individuated creations but knowledge of the community *en masse*. Hence, the teller of the story eventually is also the keeper and ‘custodian’ of the story on whom the burden and obligation lies to pass down the knowledge to the younger generation. The stories are often associated with natural geographical sites that are considered sacred. Such stories also talk about a collective knowledge that prepares the younger generation towards community feeling and existence against the harsh natural topography of Australia. One such important dreamtime story of creation is that of “Wagal” or “Wakaal”—the Rainbow Serpent—that is common to almost every Aboriginal community. This is a story that talks about how the Australian Aborigines, the natural sites and topography and terrain were created. It narrates the primary heritage and law, custom and tradition. It is the story of the most ancient being and how it created the boundaries of a particular Aboriginal community.

The story of the “Rainbow Serpent” gets its name from the obvious association between the rainbow and the serpent—both shaped similarly. It is believed that the rainbow serpent came from beneath the ground and moved upwards to create various terrains on the earth. It kept on moving from one waterhole to another and thereby emerging and vanishing from the earth and from human sight. Its exit and entry from one waterhole to another gives it the shape of a rainbow. Just as a rainbow is a marker for rain similarly waterholes which are thought to be the abode of the serpent never dry up. It is thought that without the rainbow serpents the waters on the ground would dry up. When the serpent is angry thunderstorms and cyclones occur. Its sexuality varies from myth to myth. Thus rainbow serpents are associated by various anthropologists with fertility rites. It would be relevant to cite an instance of *Wakaal* legend that was narrated by a Whadjuck/ Balardong story teller (and recounted by Tom Bennell):

The *Waakal* — that’s a carpet snake and there is a dry carpet [snake with white markings] and a wet carpet snake [purple colouring]. The old *Waakal* that lives in the water, they never let them touch them. Never let the children play with those. They reckon that is *Nyungar koolongkawarrawernitiwarbanin*, the *Waakal*, you’re not to play with that carpet snake, that is bad. *Boordanoonook mighty minditchandwernitj*. That means you might get sick and die. They never let them (the kids) touch them [carpet snake] when they go out. *Nidjabarlup Waakalmarbukalnyininy*— that means he is a harmless carpet snake. He lives in the bush throughout Nyungar boodjar. But that old water snakes; they never let the touch ‘em. They are two different sorts of carpet snake. If anybody ever see them, the old bush carpet, he got white marks on him. But the real water snake oh, he is pretty, that carpet snake...the Nyungar call him *Waakalkierpwernitj*. That means that carpet snake, he belongs to the water. You mustn’t touch that snake; that’s no good. If you kill that carpet snake *noonookbarminyiny* that *Waakalngullakierpuart*, that means our water dries up – none. That is their history stories and very true, too. They [the Nyungars] never let their children touch or mess around with those carpet snakes. If they come down here to *Mindjarliny*, the old Nyungar call that *Mindjarliny*,

noonookMindjarlinykoorlnyininy, Nyungar wam. Waakalcarrungupiny—that means that carpet snake is going to get savage. *MulgarinyWaakalkoorlinyoonar mar yirawalbillariny*, see — they reckon that carpet snake could make a storm come. Make it rain for them. Mandikan, that’s a spring pool down west of Beverley. They call that Mandikan that is *wernitjkierpfor djinanganynoonookkierpbarlung*. It is fresh water, just like rainwater. When we were carting water from there, one time, one old Nyungar come and said, Oh, *koorlongkanoonookkierpnartchaburanginydjennagarMandikan*. That is *warrawernitj*, he said. “Nidjakierpngarda mar koorlinybenang—this water underneath sky going tomorrow [it’s going to rain tomorrow]”. Well, that night it did [rain]. Thunder and lightning, a lot of it and it was a miracle. Whether it’s true or not, but that’s how it happened. We had a big thunderstorm. We were clearing there, right alongside the water at the time, and all that clearing, it washed the logs right out. We had to wait a week for it to dry out before we could burn it...[but] by jove, it was true. Anyway we all packed up and left. (as cited in Van den Bergh 4)

At various times in the literary history of Aboriginal Australia such tales and myths, legends and folklore were collected and published. One such prominent collection was David Unaipon’s *Legendary Tales*. The first Aboriginal writer of Australia, David Unaipon used the myths and legends of Aboriginal Australia to wield an identity for the Aboriginal peoples. His celebratory mood in his *Legendary Tales* which is an astounding collection of ethnographic contents (myths, legends and stories from ancient Dreamtime orally handed down by Ngarrindjeri Elders to the younger generations) are most remarkable in unveiling the non-institutionalized cultural heritage of Aboriginal Australia to the Western eye. Stephen Muecke and Adam Shoemaker in their “Introduction” to the *Legendary Tales* says:

In all respects — whether one is considering content, ethnography, aesthetics or language — Unaipon’s work is unlike that of any other Australian writer, regardless of race or cultural background. It is eclectic, reflecting as it does the author’s journeys all over Southern Australia. It is syncretic, deploying elements of sources as varied as Christian sermons and European fairytales within the crucial framework of indigenous Australian oral traditions. It is also strategic: a pattern of writing reflecting a pattern of escape from European institutional control, where the very act of collecting and writing stories — certain *types* of stories — became Unaipon’s passport away from the constraints of the mission system in the 1920s. (xi-xii)

It is this covertly politicized motive, with a syncretic style and an identity bulwarking intention, as found in the tales and legends of Unaipon, that form the basis of later Aboriginal novels to arrive. Further, it is the delight in such storytelling, a tendency innate in Aboriginal culture that later shaped the stylistic features of the Aboriginal novelists.

3.3 ABORIGINAL NOVELISTS: AN INTRODUCTION

As is evident from the above discussion, since the days of Unaipon, Aboriginal writers have resisted conventional European narrative technique, style and the genre in general. The realistic tradition of western novel writing was abjured by most of the Aboriginal writers in favour of mixing fact with fiction, realism with magic, history with story. Such strategies interwoven in the Aboriginal texts

began with Colin Johnson's (Mudrooroo) *Wild Cat Falling* (1956). This semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional writing traces the story of a young Aboriginal man for two days post his coming out of prison. The novel uses the motif of a cat with whom the young man is identified. The story concludes with the Wild Cat's arrest for attempted murder and hence the search of the protagonist to acquire a place in the Fremantle society is frustrated amidst perpetual marginality and alienation.

As already mentioned, though *Wild Cat Falling* was initially considered as the first Aboriginal novel, after the identity hoax case surrounding Mudrooroo, Monica Clare's *Karobran* (1978) is regarded as the first Aboriginal novel. Clare's semi-autobiographical novel is based on her growing up in reserves, missionaries and white foster homes in New South Wales. The next most important novel chronologically, was Archie Weller's *Day of the Dog* (1981). Much like *Wild Cat Falling*, Weller's novel is about a boy who comes out of prison. Doug Dooligan, the young protagonist, desires to move out from the abominable life which had led him to prison. Yet the lure of alcohol, girls and quick cash through stealing leads him astray. The story ends in a tragic car accident which takes the life of Doug and his friends who were being chased by the police for criminal activities. The story depicts the pitiful condition of urban Aboriginal youth who have been deracinated.

Other important Aboriginal novels include: John MukMuk Burke's *Bridge of Triangles* (1994) and Herb Wharton's *Unbranded* (1992). If the first novel re-sensitizes the theme of a deracinated wayward Aboriginal youth (Chris Leeton, the main character in this story) trying to assert his identity in his own land to the settlers and inevitably faces poverty and snapping of familial ties, then the next novel takes the readers out on a tour of the exotic Australian outback. Kim Scott arrives on the Aboriginal literary scene with his novel *True Country* in 1993. We will be discussing the novels of Scott separately in the next section.

Just as in Scott's *True Country* even Sam Watson in *The Kadaitcha Sung*, Alexis Wright in *Plains of Promise* (1997) and Archie Weller in *Land of the Golden Clouds* (1998) utilized the magic realist trend. Watson's novel in its violent graphic depiction of the atrocities committed by the White community and Native Mounted Police on the Aborigines unsettles the White complacency. Watson asserts: "I wanted to make a statement and I wanted to get into the hearts and minds of the great, unwashed Australian masses [...] and say, this is what ... you've done to my land and my people" (590). Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* also depicts the violence and abuse carried out on the stolen generation (by both white and black men) in missions and institutes from the mid nineteenth century till the 1970s.

Another common theme with the Aboriginal novelists is the rewriting of Australian history from the Aboriginal perspective. Other than Mudrooroo's *Long Live Sandawarra* (1979), *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983) and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991), Eric Willmot's *Pemulwuy* (1987) is one such novel that talks about the resistance of the Aboriginal people in the Sydney region. Published during the Bicentenary year, the novel is a strategic move at Aboriginal identity reclamation and protest against colonization. Reclaiming Aboriginal history is also to be noticed in the heroic portrayal of Bulmurn—the titular protagonist—by Richard Wilkes. If Alexis Wright had already brought forth the issues faced by Aboriginal women, then Melissa Lukashenko in *Steam Pigs* (1997) has depicted sexual violence on Aboriginal women by both the members of her community and White people. Rightly Penny Van Troon observes about the female protagonist of the novel: "Sue Wilson, the Murri heroine of Lakashenko's *Steam Pigs*, must decide

whether to stay with her abusive, working class Aboriginal man or accept asylum from her white, university-educated, feminist friends” (40).

In the years post 2000, Aboriginal writers have addressed a variety of concerns. After the success of *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*—that deals with the story of the stolen generation(1996)—Doris Pilkington Garimara wrote her second novel *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002). This novel through an autobiographical strain talks about how Doris was born under the wintamarra tree and from thence carried away by the authorities to the Moore River Native Settlement. Winner of Miles Franklin Award for her novel *Carpentaria* in 2006, Alexis Wright is an Aboriginal land right activist and novelist. Primarily based on the issue of land rights, the novel narrates various interconnected stories of characters in the fictional town of Desperance, situated on the Gulf of Carpentaria in northwest Queensland. It is the Aborigines’ story of conflict with and resistance against the white settlers of Desperance. It is a tirade against the large multinational mining operation that has been established on the sacred grounds of the country. Two other novels of Wright that have also won much critical acclaim are *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *The Swan Book* (2007).The latest novel by Wright, *The Swan Book*, is a dystopia set in the future where the Aboriginals are living under the Intervention in the north amidst an environment altered due to climate change. The novel traces the story of a mute young Aboriginal woman, who is gang-raped (by petrol-sniffing youths) - Oblivia, from her life in a swamp with innumerable black swans to becoming the first lady of Australia by her marriage to Warren Finch—the first Aboriginal president of Australia.

Novelist Larissa Yasmin Behrendt, the first Aboriginal graduate from Harvard law school, is currently a Professor of Indigenous Research and Director of Research at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney. She has to her credit two novels. The first one *Home* (2004) won the Queensland Premier’s Literary Award, the David Unaipon Award, and the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Novel in the South-east Asian/South Pacific region in 2005. Her second novel, *Legacy*, won the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Indigenous Writing (2010).

An Adjunct Professor with Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, University of Technology, Sydney, Anita Heiss is a versatile Aboriginal novelist. With deep insight into contemporary Aboriginal life, her novels such as *Not Meeting Mr. Right* (2007), *Avoiding Mr. Right* (2008), *Manhattan Dreaming* (2010) and *Tiddas* (2014) are politicized personal statements that go beyond standard prose. Another widely read Aboriginal novelist is Tara June Winch. Her novel *Swallow the Air* (2006) is a visceral poetic rendition of a shy girl’s growing up years spent on the fringes of Wollongong. The non-didactic style of this multi-award winning novel also deals with major social issues of contemporary urban Aboriginal life.



Anita Heiss (source: Wikimedia commons)

Check your progress 1

1. Trace the evolution and growth of Aboriginal novels of Australia.
2. Write a note on the major thematic concerns of Australian Aboriginal novels.
3. Write a short note on the achievement of Australian Aboriginal Women novelists.
4. Discuss the recent trends (post 2000) in Australian Aboriginal novel writing.

3.4 Kim Scott: An Introduction

Aboriginal novelist, short-story writer, poet, and activist Kim Scott makes his purpose of writing very clear in the following words: “As a writer . . . it seems to me that my identity is about articulating a position I inhabit at an intersection of histories and peoples, and it is an obligation to speak for those people in my family who history has silenced, and by attempting this, to step forward with a heritage largely denied me” (as cited in John Fielder8).



Kim Scott(source commons.Wikimedia.org)

Hence, reclaiming hitherto denied Aboriginal identity by re-narrating family history from the perspective of a marginalized and dispossessed community is the prominent theme in the novels of Kim Scott. Scott belongs to the Noongar (also spelt as Nyoongar, Nyungar) people of South-West

Western Australia between the Gairdner River and Cape Arid. His clan is Wirlomin. The eldest of four siblings, he was born of a white mother and an Aboriginal father. The name of his extended Noongar family is 'Roberts' – a name thrust upon one of his ancestors by a policeman named Roberts, who titled the former "Robert's Boy" which according to Scott, was not a pleasing way to be given a British identity.

In the 1960s, he moved with his family to the southern coastal town of Albany and later, while studying in a school in the inland town of Narrogin, he had his first brush with racism and its indelibly dislocating impact on his community. Recognized nationally and internationally both his novels *Benangand That Deadman Dance* have received the highest literary award of Australia—the Miles Franklin award. Scott was appointed Professor of Writing in the School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts of Curtin University in December, 2011. He is a member of The Centre for Culture and Technology (CCAT), leading its Indigenous Culture and Digital Technologies research program.

3.4.1 *True Country*

Scott had spent some of his early years in a variety of job positions. One such job was a stint in a remote school in an Aboriginal community in the north of Western Australia—an experience that goaded him to write his first novel *True Country*. The story of the novel calls to attention Aboriginal issues like extreme poverty, drug-abuse, deracination, domestic violence, and a race being subjected to abominating ghettoization among other concerns. The main protagonist—Bill, a part-Aboriginal school teacher, comes to the Karnama community of the Kimberly region of Western Australia in order to explore his Aboriginal heritage. A man who for most part of his life has been brought up with a Euro-Australian cultural orientation, the main character, Billy, has been light skinned enough to always have passed as a white man. Billy finds out for himself the abject state of the Karnama community. Its young generation, has failed to hold on to its traditional values and myths and is more inclined towards the mores of modern white life-style. Further Billy's Anglo-Celtic upbringing questions his own Aboriginal essences within. The obvious reason behind both is the corrosive assimilative workings of the white Australian nation-state. Driven by the zeal to unearth the spiritual truth/identity about this community and his self, Billy sets out for a search.

Out of the squalor—both social and cultural—Billy recovers the meaning of true Aboriginal identity both at individual and community level. In this process of recovering an Aboriginal identity he is joined by a number of members of the Karnama community who orally narrate their stories and thereby culturally subverts the white nation-state and its colonialist/modernist policies and projects. At the same time, as identity is internally heterogeneous, slippery, unstable and situational, reclaiming a true Aboriginal identity remains a matter of strategic and subversive cultural resistance. If storytelling, an alternative narrative, itself is a common public culture with the Aborigines, which recollect memories and fashions it out of myth, then the same identity building technique has been strategized consciously by Scott to act as a tool of subversion. Scott not only appropriates the Eurocentric canonical standards of written narratives and standardized language structure, but also mixes a magic realist style with 'Dreamtime' spirituality. These stories help fill in the gaps and fissures of documented history of the White missionaries and revive the impoverished culture of the community. While resisting such deracinating practices, the author discovers a 'true country'—a true Aboriginal identity—that could be realized beyond the apparent truths.

3.4.2 *That Deadman Dance*

Kim Scott's latest novel *That Dead Man Dance* (2010) is a part fictional, part historical account of the relations between Whites and Noongars during the early settlement era (1833-44) in Western Australia. The novel talks about a cross-cultural relationship between the two races that began on a note of friendship, camaraderie and naive, open acceptance but is eroded away due to the colonizer's racist bigotry, assimilationist tendencies, greed, capitalist exploitation and even due to the role of repressive state authorities who institutionalized coercive methods to control 'native problems'. A discerning reading of the text focuses on this and more. The novel is about the struggle of the Noongars from the beginning to hold tight to their culture and ethnicity even though trying out novel western ways, and then taking recourse to and adopting appropriative methods when the gross, violent programme of promoting the White nation-state slowly marginalized them; and finally bulwarking their identity against the White outsiders. The story is narrated with audacity and musicality, austerity and sensitivity, evocative emotionalism and mesmerizing recollections, through the eyes of both Whites and Aborigines. The story begins with a "Prologue" by the linchpin character Bobby Wabalanginy who later in his life as an old tourist guide recollects a substantial part of the story.

3.5 Let us Sum up

In this section we have traced the evolution and growth of the Australian Aboriginal novel and located the novels of Kim Scott within this tradition. We have in this Unit seen how story telling practices of the Aborigines had been one of the major factors in formulating the narrative skills of the novelists. Gradually with the appropriation of the Eurocentric concept of scripting and writing, the Aborigines were able to tell their own story from their own vantage point. Beginning with writing of myths and legends gradually they attempted other genres such as the novel. Further, for the Aborigines the novel became a tool for asserting identity of self and the community. The novels address issues of distorted history and culture at the hands of the Whites, issues of land rights, and pressing social issues of the Aborigines in the urban and rural areas. Kim Scott's three novels also deal with these issues at various points. For Scott his novels are tools to voice protest and hence are cultural resistance generating devices.

3.6 UNIT END QUESTION

Discuss the contribution of Kim Scott in the making of the canon of the Australian Aboriginal novel.

3.7 KIM SCOTT – SELECTED PUBLICATIONS AND SPEECHES

(This exhaustive list is based on *A Companion to the Works of Kim Scott* ed. Belinda Wheeler)
1985

"In Perspective." *Patterns* 4, no. 6 (1985): 3.

1986

"Our Father, Koo-ee-lung." *Fremantle Arts Review* 1, no. 9 (1986): 9.

"Tidings." *Fremantle Arts Review* 1, no. 10 (1986): 8.

1987

“Pub Breakfast.” *Fremantle Arts Review* 2, no. 6 (1987): 9.

1993

True Country. South Fremantle, Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1993.

1995

“Registering Romance.” In *Summer Shorts 3*, edited by Bill Warnock and Diana Warnock, 36–40. South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995.

1996

“The First One (from a Work-in-Progress).” In *Risks*, edited by Brenda Walker, 28–31. South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996.

1997

“High Diving.” In *Golden Harvest: Stories of Australian Women*, edited by B. R. Coffey, 21–31. South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997.

1999

Benang: From the Heart. North Fremantle, Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999.

2000

“Disputed Territory.” In *Those Who Remains Will Always Remember: An Anthology of Aboriginal Writing*, edited by Anne Brewster, Angeline O’Neill, and Rosemary Van Den Berg, 162–71. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000.

“Into the Light (after Hans Heysen’s Painting of the Same Name).” In Brewster, O’Neill, and Van Den Berg, *Those Who Remain*, 121–24.

2001

Foreword to *Untreated: Poems by Black Writers*. Edited by Josie Douglas. Alice Springs: Jukurpa Books, 2001.

“Writer, Coolbellup.” In *Indigenous Australia: Standing Strong*, edited by Penny Tweedie, 154–56. Sydney: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

2002

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Foreword to *Talking Straight: Publishing Aboriginal Writing*. Edited by Anita Heiss. Canberra: IAD Press, 2002.

“Wangelanginy.” *Southerly* 62, no. 2 (2002): 98–99.

2004

“High Diving.” In *Golden Harvest: Stories of Australian Women*, edited by B. R. Coffey, 21–31. North Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2004.

2005

Kayang and Me. (Coauthored with Hazel Brown.) Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005.

“Stories Dig Deep into Family Lore.” (Coauthored with Hazel Brown.) *Western Australian*, October 3, 2005, 10.

2006

“A Protocol For Laves’ 1931 Noongar Field Notes.” (Co-authored with Denise Smith-Ali, Hannah McGlade, and John Henderson.) 2006. http://wirlomin.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Language-Laves_Protocol.pdf.

2007

“Strangers at Home.” In *Translating Lives: Living with Two Languages and Cultures*, edited by Mary Besemeres and Anna Wierzbicka, 147–58. Brisbane: UQ Press, 2007.

2008

“An Island Home.” In *Just Words?: Australian Authors Writing for Justice*, edited by Bernadette Brennan, 152–61. Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2008.

“A Noongar Voice, An Anomalous History.” *Westerly* 53 (November 2008): 93–106.

2010

That Deadman Dance. Sydney, NSW: Picador, 2010.

2011

Mamang. (Coauthored with Iris Woods and the WirlominNoongar Language and Stories Project.) Illustrated by Jeffrey Farmer, Helen Nelly, and Roma Winmar. Crawley: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2011.

NoongarMambaraBakitj. (Coauthored with Lomas Roberts and the WirlominNoongar Language and Stories Project.) Illustrated by Geoffrey Woods and Anthony Roberts. Crawley: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2011.

“Language and Politics in Indigenous Writing.” (Coauthored with John Bradley and Marie Munkara.) *Overland* 205 (Summer 2011): 55–60.

“Voices in Australia’s Aboriginal and Canada’s First Nations Literatures.” (Coauthored with Eden Robinson.) *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13, no. 2 (2011): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1747&context=clcweb>.

2012

“Gnowangerup Doctors.” (Coauthored with Hazel Brown.) In *Sunscreen and Lipstick*, edited by Naama Amram, 137–41. Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2012.

“The Miles Franklin Literary Award—Kim Scott at Curtin University.” YouTube. Curtin University, Western Australia, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdI_yg0DzeQ.

“Miles Franklin Oration.” 2012. http://www.milesfranklin.com.au/events/oration_2012.htm.

“A Whisper in Stone.” *Westerly* 57, no. 2 (2012): 10–15.

2013

“Jerramungup Dreaming: Ethel Hassell’s *My Dusky Friends* Is Finally Published.” In *Telling Stories: Australian Life and Literature, 1935–2010*, edited by Tanya Dalziell and Paul Genon, 336–42. Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2013.

Kwoort Baal Kaat. (Coauthored with Russell Nelly and the WirlominNoongar Language and Stories Project.) Illustrated by Helen (Ing) Hall. Crawley: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2013.

Yira BoornakNyinyiny. (Coauthored with Hazel Brown, Roma Winmar, and the WirlominNoongar Language and Stories Project.) Illustrated by Anthony (Troy) Roberts. Crawley: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2013.

2014

“Of Aboriginal Descent.” In *Remembered by Heart*, edited by Sally Morgan, 157–60. Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Press, 2014.

2015

“Not So Easy: Language for a Shared History.” *Griffith Review* 47, “Looking West” (2015): 200–214.

3.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Toorn, Penny Van. “Indigenous Texts and Narratives.” *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*. Ed. Elizabeth Webby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200. Print.

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Van den Bergh, Rosemary. *Nyoongar People of Australia: Perspectives on Racism and Multiculturalism*. Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 2002. Print.

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Webby, Elizabeth. *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200. Print.

Wheeler, Belinda. *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*. New York: Camden House, 2013. Print.

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UNIT 18 *BENANG: FROM THE HEART - THE* BACKGROUND

Structure

18.0 Objectives

18.1 Introduction

18.2 A.O. Neville: Life and Works

18.2.1. A.O. Neville: A Brief Biography

18.2.2. “*Australia’s Coloured Minority: It’s Place in the Community*” and Letters and Articles by Neville

18.2.3 *Benang* and A.O. Neville

18.3 The Noongar World

18.4 Kim Scott on *Benang*

18.5 Let us sum up

18.6 Unit end Questions

18.7 Suggested Readings

18.0 OBJECTIVES

Benang (1999), Kim Scott’s novel which won the Miles Franklin Award in the year 2000, is a semi-autobiographical novel. A major part of it is about re-telling the history of the Noongar community from the perspective of a member of that community rather than relying on the concocted and documented ‘historical’ White evidences. Hence, to understand the novel in its true perspective, one ought to understand the backdrop of the novel. In this Unit we will look at the documented White history (precisely into the book *Australia’s Coloured Minority* written by the Chief Protector of the Aborigines, A.O. Neville) about the Noongars, explaining how the same had merely eulogized the colonialist agenda of ‘white-washing’ a black community without any regard for the latter’s traditional way of life. We will also attempt to gain insights into the socio-cultural makeup and worldview of the Noongar people in this unit. Finally we will analyse the various comments, writings and speeches of Kim Scott pertaining to the novel. This is important as *Benang* is not purely fictional or imaginary writing, but a part-fictional, part-historical/biographical work.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Susan Midalia, an interviewer of the author: “*Benang* began, he (Kim Scott) explained, with a dual purpose: as an exploration of both his personal narrative or place in his own family history, and the wider social/historical narrative of the oppression of Aboriginal people. He wanted to deal with his sense of being psychologically damaged and culturally dispossessed as ‘the first white man born’ in his immediate family, the product of a long-standing, systematic, state-sanctioned policy of assimilation or the ‘biological absorption’, as it was called, of the Aboriginal race. *Benang*, in short, was written as a fictionalized version of family history, in order to investigate non-Aboriginal

attitudes to Aboriginality, issues of power, and the psychosis which Kim believes lies at the heart of mainstream non-Aboriginal culture.”

To make this possible Scott continued to research the history of his family and community for five years. He rummaged through various articles, letters, documents, books, Parliamentary files, newspaper articles, Royal Commission Report—a list of which he provides at the end of the novel. But, perhaps the main documents that are read by Scott against the grain are by A.O. Neville, the “Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia” from 1915-1940. Hence in this Unit we will first need to have a comprehensive view about A.O. Neville and his works and how the same are centred around a racist, bigotted and assimilationist policy. The other important aspect that needs to be analyzed before we arrive at a proper understanding of *Benang* relates to the Noongar culture and life. The 45,000 years old culture that was thought to have been wiped away by the White absorption and acculturation had been proved otherwise. At the end of the Unit we will look at snippets of quotations from the various speeches, interviews and academic entries made by Kim Scott pertaining to *Benang*. This will be helpful in the better contextualizing of the novel which as has already been mentioned is part-biographical.

4.2 A.O. NEVILLE: LIFE AND WORKS

4.2.1 A.O. NEVILLE: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Auber Octavius Neville (1875-1954) was born in England. He started off his career as a banker and later joined his brother in Western Australia as a records clerk in the Department of Works. An efficient worker, he was then appointed registrar of a sub-department of the Premier's Office in 1900, and in 1902 was promoted as Registrar of the Colonial Secretary's Department. In 1906 Neville became an immigration officer and later headed the department. But it is the next phase of his life that made him more famous or rather infamous. He is known primarily for his work as chief protector of Aborigines. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* makes the following entry about A.O. Neville:

As chief protector (1915-36) and commissioner for native affairs (1936-40), his strategy was to extend the department's legal authority, particularly over people of part descent, his main interest. At his instigation, regulations were issued under the 1905 Aborigines Act, and the Act itself was amended, to give the department more power, particularly over children. Amending legislation in 1936, following the Moseley report, owed much to Neville. The ostensible purpose was to bring about permanent segregation of Aborigines of full descent, who were believed to be near extinction; and temporary segregation and training of those of part descent who would re-enter society as domestics and farm-workers, eventually blending with the white population through intermarriage. To this end Neville energetically pursued the plan of his predecessor Charles F. Gale to establish settlements in the State's south-west. Carrolup (1915) and Moore River (1918) were intended as training institutions and centres for the provision of education, health services and rations. However, because of increasingly severe governmental economies, Carrolup closed in 1922 and Moore River became a repository for juvenile and adult offenders, unmarried mothers, children, and the elderly and indigent. Health and housing conditions at Moore River deteriorated rapidly, particularly during the Depression, when most Aborigines in the south-west became dependent on rations

and white rural communities strove to remove them. Neville took a close interest in administration, as witnessed by his careful system of records and frequent inspection tours. While some Aborigines appreciated his concern, others referred to 'Mister Neville' in tones suggesting awe and even fear. His unwilling but unavoidable reliance on police as local 'protectors' contributed to a tradition of Aboriginal hostility towards police and 'the welfare'. Educated Aborigines from the south-west, whose legal and social status plummeted as a result of his measures, saw Neville as their main adversary. William Harris described the protector as one of the Aborigines' 'worst enemies'. The irony of Neville's administration was that in aggregating the power to assimilate Aborigines of part descent through economic and social (genetic) absorption, he accelerated the pauperization and segregation evident since the 1900s. Closer settlement in the south-west, competition from white workers, and the racial prejudice of rural communities worried by increase in the Aboriginal population, all helped to produce the 'Aboriginal problem' that Neville wished to solve. (n.pg.)

4.2.2. "AUSTRALIA'S COLOURED MINORITY: ITS PLACE IN THE COMMUNITY" AND LETTERS AND ARTICLES BY NEVILLE

Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community written by Neville in 1947, after his retirement, is an autobiographical construction. This work adopts a subjective point of view while discussing the ideal situations pertaining to the control and management of the natives of Australia. There are chapters titled "Assimilation," "Institutions," "Camps and Housing," "Education," "Youth, Work, Wages," and "National Control." These are chapters that hand down a futuristic vision of an "ideal Australia" free from 'native problems'. For example, in the chapter titled "Institutions", Neville promotes the idea of segregating children of "mixed-race" from their Aboriginal parents so that they could be trained as per the modern White ways and thereby be better employed as productive citizens of the nation-state: "The child's whole life from infancy ... up to eighteen years or thereabouts, is to be spent in this centre" (127). His text is a pseudo-anthropological venture in the definition and classification of the Aborigines of Australia based on their pigmentation. He often reminds the reader of the binary between the "full-blooded Aborigines" and the Whites. He labels the Aborigines as "coloured people" and even categorizes the "purity" of their Aboriginality based on darkness-lightness factors of their pigmentation.

He picks up eugenicist terminologies in defining "half-blood" and "half-caste" together as "Offspring of full-blood Aboriginal and a white person. Offspring of two persons both half-blood" (7). His categorization and definition further goes down to "octoroon," (one eighth of Aboriginal ancestry) and "quadroon" (one fourth of Aboriginal ancestry) (8). The work thus becomes an open colonial project of absorption of the Australian Aborigines. The other primary concern of the text is the management of the "coloured minority" of the White nation-state. Neville uses ideas of Hitler (twice he quotes Hitler), as stated in his *Mein Kampf*, to justify his project of miscegenation, eugenics and Western education for the Aborigines. But educating the Aborigines was not the only method to bring the natives within the structure of "mainstream" White Australia. He wanted to "breed out" the Aborigines. He advocated for the admixture of the White and Aboriginal blood through interbreeding so that the Aborigines in the process become White. Hence, Neville wanted an Australia with a total extinction of the pure-blooded Aborigines through a bio-political move. Neville also micro-managed the training process of the part-Aborigines—a kind of cultural colonization—so that they could pass off as Whites.

He wrote letters and was in constant correspondence with the Superintendent of the Moore River Native Settlement, a central government institution in Western Australia that housed Indigenous people (many of whom were separated from their families through Neville's child removal policy). It is this constant surveillance policy which Neville also focuses on in his book. In many of his letters, his obsessive, paternalistic and micro-managing surveillance attitude comes to the fore. On 15 September 1937, he wrote to the Superintendent of the Moore River Native Settlement:

Will you kindly let me know what is done in the way of providing handkerchiefs for the inmates of the Settlement. On Monday and Tuesday when at Moore River I noticed a few cases of very dirty noses and apparently the children had no means of keeping themselves clean. I have no doubt that if the handkerchiefs were provided many of them would be lost and it has occurred to me that possibly this might be overcome if the handkerchief were sewn onto the garment by way of a tape. (Moore River Correspondence 62)

His attitude of controlling even intensely personal matters is made obvious through his "Letter of Permission" regarding the marriage of various Aboriginal men and women of Perth region. In a 1937 letter he wrote to the Reverend Hardy of Perth's Forrest River Mission:

I received your letter (undated) enclosing details forwarded by the Superintendent of Forrest River Mission respecting certain marriages recommended by him to the Bishop of the North-West, and seeking my approval thereto. These are dealt with seriatim hereunder: Kate and Andrew: I have no objection to this marriage and in fact have wired to Wyndham in order to ascertain whether the matter can be expedited, as I have a position available for this young couple at Derby Native Hospital. John and Mary: No objection. Daniel and Molly: I object to this marriage on the grounds that Molly is a half-caste and Daniel is a full-blood, and this is in keeping with the decisions of the recent conference of authorities on Native Matters held at Canberra. Colin and Elizabeth: No objection. Conrad and Susan: No objection. Donald and Daffodil: No objection, providing Daffodil's mother Polly consents in the presence of witnesses. Alex. Menmuir and Elsie: No objection. (Marriages between Aboriginals or Half-Castes & others, 34)

Rightly R. Dorgelo, in his thesis—"The Chief Protector Returns: Textual Representations of A. O. Neville"—states that such letters are "explicit example(s) of Neville exercising his power to its fullest extent" (34). This tendency to exercise discipline and control is fictionalized in Kim Scott's *Benang*.



Mr. A. O. NEVILLE.

Source: Wikimedia commons

Check your progress 1

Write an essay on the ideas of A.O. Neville—the “Chief Protector of the Aborigines”.

4.2.3 *BENANG* AND A.O. NEVILLE

Neville is present in *Benang* as a character. He is the distant relation of the protagonist Harley’s grandfather Ernest Solomon Scat. *Benang* is an answer to the eugenicist project of Neville and successfully destabilizes and critiques it. Scott frequently quotes from the works, articles and letters of Neville and appropriates them to deconstruct Neville’s attempts to establish supremacy over the Aborigines. Neville’s colonial project of breeding out the Aborigines (in both cultural and eugenicist senses) is disrupted in *Benang*. Lisa Slater aptly points to the significance of Neville’s presence in *Benang*: “[b]y inserting A.O. Neville into his novel, Scott is not only introducing readers to a key historical figure in the abuse of Nyoongar people, he is also mimicking Neville’s colonial discursive strategy of catching and containing Indigenous people” (“Most Local” 56).

Scott himself talks about the positioning of Neville in his historicized fiction. In an interview given to Jill Kitson, Scott comments: “In W.A. the voice of one A.O. Neville dominates ... he wrote a book called *Australia’s Coloured Minority: Their Place in Our Community* [sic]. The title is instructive, isn’t it? Their place, our community” (Kitson). From the beginning of the novel Neville and Scat are brought close to each other:

Ernest Solomon Scat ... with his arm inserted in the filing system, up to the elbow in the documents of the very respectable Auber Neville’s office. My grandfather, so recently arrived from his own country, had come to his distant relation Mr AO Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, no less, and—until recently—chief of a department representing the odd combination of the North-west *and* Aborigines *and* Fisheries. (37)

Neville exerts a huge influence on Scat: “Ern found himself needing advice, reassurance, further security. He returned to the city, for a few short weeks, and did a little work for that good friend of the family, Auber Neville” (118). If Neville is shown by Kim Scott as the engineer of a corrupt

ideology then Scat is definitely the most perfect practitioner of the same. R. Dorgelo properly puts it: “As well as consistently representing Neville alongside Scat, Scott also characterises Neville as multi-faceted: at times powerful and in control, at others as a ridiculous figure. He also utilises the common rhyme of “devil” with Neville, highlighting his abuse of (and desire for) power” (54).

Check your progress 2

Analyze the role of the character Neville in Scott’s *Benang*.

4.3. THE NOONGAR WORLD

Kim Scott is a descendant of the Wirlomin or Bibbelmun clan of the Noongar community living between Cape Arid and Gairdner and was ‘the first white man born’ in his family, the product of state sponsored assimilation or ‘biological absorption.’ As has already been mentioned, an Aboriginal individual is an integral part of his community, land and culture. For a better understanding of this autobiographical novel *Benang* we must understand the Noongar worldview. The Nungar / Noongar / Nyungar / Nyoongar (the word when translated means people) refer to the community inhabiting the South-West of Western Australia. Their country was a large one, stretching from Jurien Bay in the north to Esperance in the south coast, Geraldton on the west coast to Ravensthorpe and Southern Cross in the east.

No one knows for sure as to what was the count of the Noongars before the arrival of the European colonizer. “Robert Lyon estimated that there were about 1000 Aborigines living in what is now metropolitan Perth and Fremantle... Within twenty years of settlement, epidemics of typhus, cholera, influenza and whooping cough decimated the Nyungar population” (Neville Green n.pg.). To the Noongars, land is linked with Dreamtime existence and hence is of utmost importance. From early childhood, a Nyoongar child is taught the links, associations, laws and customs pertaining to the land. Noongar stories abound in the land, water and sky. And nature is thereby marked with places/sites (rock, hill, waterhole, stars, cave) of special importance which the Noongars mark as sacred. Just as with land, an identity of a Noongar is linked with his / her community. A community is a well-knit, albeit complex, structure of kinship. For example, for a Noongar a Mother’s sister is addressed as Mother and similarly a Father’s brother is not called uncle but Father, whereas a mother’s brother is an uncle and father’s sister is an aunt. The Noongars were essentially nomadic and travelled from one harvest food to the next. They had no villages but instead had ‘Kaleeps’ or camping sites. In the camping sites supplies of drinking water, sources of food and material to construct waterproof huts during the winter were available. Around such camps, in the evening, the Noongars sat together singing ceremonial songs of Dreamtime.

The Noongars’ first interaction with the Europeans took place through William Dampier and his men. Dampier anchored his ship the “Cygnet” in 1688 off the north-west coast of Australia. He even captured a few men and brought them to the ship to see if they could be enslaved and employed but the attempt was futile. Matthew Flinders, captain of HMS “Investigator” sailed into King George Sound in 1801. However between the Noongars and Flinders the relationship was friendly. In 1826 it was the turn of Sir James Stirling and his men to occupy and settle down on Noongar lands and establish cities such as Perth, Fremantle, Guildford, York, Albany and Augusta. The Swan River colony was also started by Stirling. Stirling entered into no land-treaty with the Noongars.

The unassuming Noongars were friendly at the beginning having no clue that the strangers on their land were forerunners of many more to come and permanently settle. The whites killed a lot of kangaroos and their sheep ate up roots and tubers which were also food for the Aborigines. Scarcity of food and fencing of land supposed to be Aboriginal camping sites saw resistive guerrilla warfare initiated from the Noongar end. Stealing of food by the Noongars from English store became a common practice. In retaliation many Noongars were killed. The Noongar spears were no match to the English gun. The Noongar named Yagan was a famed warrior who led fights against the colonial settlers. After having speared an Englishman, William Gaze, Yagan was taken as a prisoner of law and deported to Carnac. However, Yagan with his two friends escaped from Carnac. In July 1833, two boys, James and William Keats shot Yagan dead. A settler cut off Yagan's head, preserved it and took it to England for display.

An important battle that took place near Murray River was the "Battle of Pinjarra" in October 1834. Having gained superiority over the Noongars through tangential material methods, it was time to ideologically discipline the former. The missionaries set up schools to train Noongar children to become better employed as labourers and domestic helps in white families. The first school for Aboriginal children opened in Perth was by the Methodists in September 1840. In 1845, Roman Catholic missionaries came to Western Australia and established various missions. Children were forcefully removed from the "hideous" influence of their Aboriginal parents and community to be trained in higher and refined western methods, customs and culture.

By 1905 when many Noongar children were being trained in these missionary schools the State passed a new act that made the Chief Protector the guardian of all Aboriginal children. Apparently the law was intended to be a law ameliorating the pathetic condition of the Aborigines and thereby making certain provision for them, but in actuality it was restrictive and right-infringing. According to the law children under sixteen could not be employed; and as a result of this many young Noongar boys (aged fourteen to fifteen) lost their jobs. The law required the employer to have Governmental permission, against a fee of five pounds, to employ an Aborigine. The fee being too high many Europeans stopped employing the Aborigines. The employer, by law, was exempted from giving any wages to the Aboriginal labourer and was required only to give ration, clothing and blankets. According to the law the Governor could declare certain areas to be reserves for the Aborigines. These Aboriginal reserves were most horrendous spaces with abject poverty, acute problems of water, and pressing issues of hygiene. Aborigines who were not lawfully employed could be forced to live on the reserves.

In many towns of Western Australia the Aborigines were not allowed to enter without permission between sunset and sunrise. The Chief Protector being made the legal guardian of all Aboriginal children up to the age of sixteen, allowed forceful removal of children from their parents. The Chief Protector was also given the right to possess the property and goods belonging to any Aboriginal and sell it as he wished. Aboriginal women were not allowed to marry non-Aboriginals without prior permission from the Protector. In the years that followed, the Noongars not only contributed to the making of modern Australia but even organised socio-politico-cultural protests to reinstall their identity. Surely, the Noongars are no more a static stereotypical society pigeonholed within traditional structures. However, their traditional past is an integral part of a changed 'modern' lifestyle which

they now lead. The Noongars are a dynamic group that had gone through various social changes outwardly, yet hold tight to the essential elements of their culture till date.

Check your progress 3

Write a note on the impact of colonial culture on the Noongar nation.

4.4 KIM SCOTT ON *BENANG*

In various interviews and lectures and in various academic writings, Kim Scott has presented his views on *Benang*. For a better understanding of the novel we will go through some important quotes by Scott or make a gist of Scott's observations:

In an interview given to K. Kunhikrishnan (2003), Kim Scott confirmed that the novel was inspired by research into his family and his "growing awareness of the context of that family history". The novel was hence a commingling of fact, fiction, and archival documents. Kim Scott also confessed that he had been motivated by Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* as "an example of a different way of writing a historical novel". The other writers whom Scott admires are Peter Carey, Helen Garner, Amoz Oz (particularly his *Elsewhere Perhaps*). He also admits in the interview that he wants his "writing to be valued for the discussion it stimulates in the wider community, rather than for the writing itself".

In 'Australia's Continuing Neurosis: Identity, Race and History', *The Alfred Deakin Lectures: Ideas for the Future of a Civil Society* (2001), Kim Scott says, "I went into the West Australian archives, where certain stories of our shared history are kept, and found the picture, 'Three Generations.' It's from a book called *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* . . . It was published in 1947. *Its place in the community*. What does that mean? The book explains how to 'uplift and elevate' indigenous people; it describes how Aboriginality can be bred out, how people can be cut off from indigenous family and filled with shame. In effect, he's talking about *their place in our community*."

In "What does it mean to be Aboriginal" (2000), Kim Scott talks about the background of writing *Benang*—his purpose, speaking position, autobiographical elements, etc. Scott admits in the interview that his writing was a conscious decision to make a connection with the past, to make an attempt to uplift his race and redefine Aboriginal identity.

To the question, "What was your vision when you set out to write *Benang*?", Scott answers: "I'm someone who grew up thinking of himself as "of Aboriginal descent", which is a weak way to define yourself. I began with the question: "How did I get to this historical position"? I wanted to research family history and put it in the context of a shared history of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interaction. I wanted to be able to write about things like spiritual inheritance, but as I discovered the archival material—particularly the Neville book—I felt it was important to take it on. Reading that stuff as an Aboriginal person is damaging and hurtful, and it makes you wild. I wanted to use some of the aggression and say: "okay then you so and sos, I will consider the possibility of being the end product of this sort of social engineering". If I could write a story which still affirmed an Indigenous identity from that starting point, then that would be a good thing to do."

To the question "What did you hope to achieve by writing from the position of being the "first white man born"?", Scott replies:

“I thought it would defuse or detonate all those nasty ways of thinking about oneself—that to an extent I’d internalised if I thought of myself as Aboriginal. It would clear a space for other people I know to have their say as well—so it was about making space for others. There was very little oral history available to me, but I refer to, rather than explain, other people’s experience—the reserve experience, the mission experience—and I felt there was a certain amount of integrity in doing it that way. I wanted to show that Neville’s genocidal idea of breeding us out was a weak, silly, white man’s way of thinking about this stuff—as if we’re dogs or something. I’m also wary of being niched in the mainstream—as you often are—and it seemed to me to start off as “here I am, the first white man born in the family line” was to avoid that pigeonhole, and to be very provocative.”

4.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit has been an introductory unit to the study of *Benang*. In this unit we have tried to understand the impact of A.O. Neville and his genetic engineering in the “whitening” of the entire Noongar race. We have also seen how as a character Neville is present in Scott’s *Benang* and how he makes his ideology prominent and practicable through Ernest Solomon Scat, the grandfather of the protagonist Harley. In the next section of the unit we tried to understand the Noongar race and nation and most importantly the impact of colonization on the Noongars. We rounded up the unit with Kim Scott’s own words culled from various important interviews and articles about his writing of *Benang*.

4.6 UNIT END QUESTION

Based on your reading of various interviews of Kim Scott, discuss the autobiographical elements in *Benang*.

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UNIT 19 *BENANG: FROM THE HEART: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS*

Structure

- 19.0 Objectives
 - 19.1 Introduction: Reading *Benang: From the Heart*
- 19.2 The Family Tree in *Benang*
- 19.3 The Story Outline
- 19.4 Critical Analysis: *Benang* and Aboriginal Identity
- 19.5 Let us sum up
- 19.6 Unit end Questions
- 19.7 Notes
- 19.8 Suggested Readings

19.0 OBJECTIVES

In this particular unit we come to the discussion of the Aboriginal novel *Benang: From the Heart* by Kim Scott. Our primary objective in this unit, after all the detailed background discussions in previous units of this block, is to critically appreciate the novel by Kim Scott. We will first attempt a brief analysis of the story line (although a chronological sequencing of the story, that ranges across four generations of Noongars, is difficult, due to its conscious non-linear “Dreamtime” narrative movement, constant usage of flash-back and flash-forward techniques and an incorporation of varied narrative voices). We will then proceed to analyze the novel from various critical facets used in the making of Aboriginal identity—the narrative structure, use of intertextuality, use of allegory, the tradition of Aboriginal life writing and postcolonial magic realism *etc.*

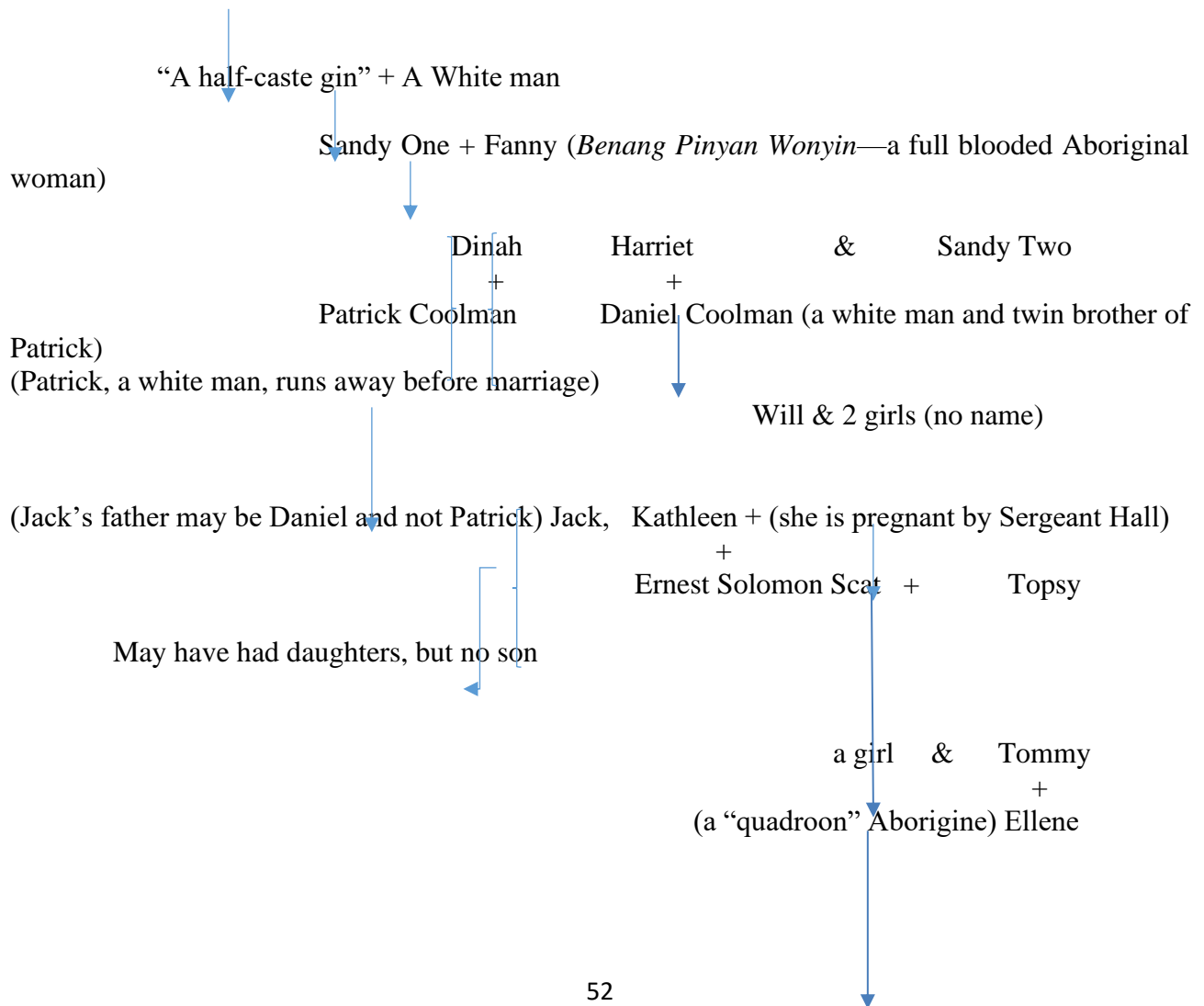
19.1 INTRODUCTION: READING *BENANG: FROM THE HEART*

Kim Scott’s *Benang* tells a story spanning generations of a Noongar family and the identity crisis faced by them in post-settlement Australia. The story is narrated by Harley—an outcome of a mixed raced eugenicist project promulgated by his white grandfather Ernest Solomon Scat. “Breed out colour” had been the ideological tenet behind the biological engineering project of Scat. Scat, an abhorrent hideous character, was all set to produce the “first white man”, with the birth of Harley, Scat, believed that he successful in removing every trace of blackness from the new-born child. But Harley who has faced enough abuse at the hand of his grandfather is a cultural throwback. By the dint of his skin colour he might look like any fair white boy but his allegiance lies with his Noongar community. The entire novel is about the unearthing of the hitherto untold stories of his Aboriginal family across generations. In the process he is able to establish and assert Noongar identity, culture and ethos. The novel is therefore about “belonging”— belonging to your own community, race, culture and nation.

If Aboriginal identity is about harnessing a community and never an individual identity then the narrative technique that accompanies the theme is an assemblage of varied narrators giving vent to a Bakhtinian polyphonic style. In this unit we will talk about the important critical aspects through which the novel may be approached. The issues of bulwarking, maintaining and re-asserting Aboriginal identity through various characters is something of primary critical importance in the novel. If the novel is about the growth and sustenance of Aboriginality then it is also about the study of Whiteness for the settler colonizers. Hence we will not only talk about the socio-cultural proponents that describe as to what is meant by being Aboriginal but will also try to understand the vain colonial racial superiority and the social construction of whiteness as projected through this text. We will also focus on the narrative technique that might according to a critic have “oceanic sweep” but none the less is complicated through the multiple narrator and an Aboriginal “Dreamtime” storytelling technique. This “Dreamtime” technique, a style peculiar to most of the Aboriginal authors of Australia, is akin to the Magic-Realist style of a post- colonial novel. In our analysis we will also focus on this particular aspect of the novel.

5.2 THE FAMILY TREE IN SCOTT’S *BENANG*

William, the Sealer + Full blooded Aboriginal woman (no name)



5.3 THE STORY OUTLINE

Benang is the story of Harley (the chief protagonist of the novel) and his search for his Aboriginal ancestry and thereby an attempt to get back to his roots. The novel presents the ways in which Harley reworks the lost history of the Noongars—a race deterritorialized from their land and culture. *Benang* is Harley’s attempt to stitch together various shards of history as found in the colonial administrative documentations, family pictures, oral narratives and memories. If the Noongars have gone through the pseudo-scientific eugenicist colonial mission of “breeding out of the colour”, a process that had siphoned and alienated them from their culture and family, then Harley’s attempt is to expose this racism through storytelling in *Benang*. Indeed, the fillip for such a story lies in the monstrous behaviour of Ern—Harley’s white grandfather who is the mind behind such phony genetic engineering: “Ern’s words [that] have fashioned Harley’s thinking.” However, by “join[ing] a different social body”—“his Nyoongar family”—Harley thereby “moves beyond racist, colonial power dynamics both by exposing racism and by participating in alternative forms of sociability and storytelling’ (Lisa Slater “Monstrous (Textual) Bodies”).

In *Benang*, the chapter ‘*first white man born*’ begins with an excerpt from *Australia’s Coloured Minority*: ‘*As I see it, what we have to do is uplift and elevate these people to our own plane . . .*’ (11). Immediately after this quote, the character Harley wakes up, his face pressed against the ceiling of his grandfather’s house:

As the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line I awoke to a terrible pressure, particularly upon my nose and forehead, and thought I was blind. In fact, the truth was there was nothing to see, except—right in front of my eyes—a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation.

Eventually, I realised my face was pressed hard against the ceiling. (*Benang* 11)

The blindness here mentioned is the blinkered view of the white colonial racist people who are blind to other races. The Australian absorptionist and assimilationist policy (the absurd ideology promulgated by Ernest Solomon Scat and A.O. Neville) that intends to whitewash the Indigenous population is mocked as a blind ideology and like the ceiling paint has neither “depth” nor “variation”. It is this surface whiteness that Harley wants to penetrate and bring out the true story of his family and kinsmen. Though white in colour (“the first white man born”) Harley proves to be a throw-back and acts as a Frankenstein to the project of his grandfather. However, the unearthing of the hitherto lost and falsified history of his nation is never an easy task. He rummages through the documents and pictures of his grandfather, collects narrations, and envisions a large part of it. Thus the novel remains a bricolage and intertext of multiple types of narratives from varied people and sources.

Although any linear narrative (an essential colonial style harping on ‘development’ and ‘progress’) of the story is consciously subverted by Scott, for a lucid understanding we might at least harp upon important movement of events in the novel. The story is set in Gwelup Township on the Western Coast of Australia early in the 20th century. Ernest Solomon Scat (A.O. Neville’s cousin) migrates to

this place from Scotland and brings along with him the complex of racial superiority in being white. This complex gets ratified in his stringent adherence of absorbing the Aborigines and constant efforts at breeding out the colour. With the birth of Harley, the third generation from Ern, Ern believes he is successful.

But, Harley refuses to accept the bestowed status of being a white boy and goes on to unfurl his Aboriginal/Noongar history. He finds out how the Noongars were always discriminated and victimized. Hence, *Benang* becomes the story of the victimisation of the Noongars of four generations and at the same time it is also the story of strategic and cultural survival of the race amidst discrimination and violence. Harley talks about his Aboriginal great grandmother Fanny and her white companion Sandy One. He also brings to fore how Fanny and her son Sandy Two led the most miserable of lives. They lived in such adversity that they had no money even to remove the dead body lying close to their home: “Kylie Bay’s Board of Health had written to Aborigines Department asking for funds for the body of said child which having been deposited within the town area by Blacks, posed a hazard to the town’s health” (*Benang* 2). And the lives of all these characters are in the hands of Neville.

Harley talks about various sufferings perpetrated by the officers on the Aborigines. There are many stories and incidents woven together. There are stories about Fanny, Sandy One, Sandy Two, Harriet, Dinah, Kathleen, Jack, Will, Topsy, Tommy, etc that Harley sets in place with the help of his two uncles (in actuality uncles of his father Tommy)—Will and Jack ‘Chatalong’. Such stories and their narration by Harley reveal a continuation of the Noongar culture. Yet at times colonial hostility had made the Noongars hide their original identity. One such case in point is that of Sandy One. It is almost at the end of the novel that the original identity of Sandy One being an Aboriginal is revealed. Harley addresses such Aborigines as ‘Shell People’ and describes the living situation as being like that of “a mollusk that withdraws until it is safe again” (455).

William Coolman is another character who has concealed his Aboriginality with a hope of leading a decent life. Distancing even from his Aboriginal mother Harriette, William marries a white woman from post war Germany. William even refuses to reveal his Aboriginal identity to his children. Will as a child started documenting local history and eulogizes his father as a pioneer with complete disregard for his Aboriginal mother. To Will the deterritorializing of his mother’s community is a non-issue just as it was to all the other White men who believed in the dictum of *terra nullius*. Will, an octoroon (Harriet being a quadroon), by his skin colour could easily pass as a white man. Ern ecstatically observes about Will: “You wouldn’t hardly know. Not when you saw him dressed up, at places where you would not expect any native to be. He spoke like a young gentleman, almost” (116).

Just as Ern denotes Harley as the ‘first white man born’, similarly Daniel Coolman dubs Will as the “first white man born”. It was not only with reference to his skin colour that Will is thought to be white; he is given a cultural whitewashing. From his very childhood he was kept away from the association and influence of other Aboriginal children for it might have caused Will “moral and physical contamination” (302). However when Will desires to buy land in the town, he was asked to seek permission from the Aboriginal Department. This and other experiences that indicated Will’s “white but not quite” status in the society lead to a kind of self-alienation and isolation. After his realization of the mistake he has made, William confesses to Harley and tells Harley how Aborigines are conspiring in their own eradication.

It is William who tells Harley that Sandy One Manson was an Aboriginal who had subscribed to the mores and manners of white life and culture. Sandy two had registered his children as members of the white society and got them married off to the Coolman twins. Both completely imbibed the white man ways of living and believed that this was the way to survive. Yet things were not of much avail as both Coolman and Sandy One Mason were often rejected as equal members of the white society and were not exempted on occasions. Granting exemption was a strategy used by the colonizer to erase indigenous identity, as exemption was only granted to people who severed every tie with their community. Jack Chatalong applied for exemption. However, the application was cancelled as it was believed that permitting him to enter a pub might lead him to supply alcohol to the Aborigines. Even people granted exemption were never treated as equal to the white race. The Aboriginal character Harry, who had the exemption certificate with him, was harassed by the white men at the pub. He was told by a white man, "You might have some bit of paper but we know what you are. You don't belong here. Not with us" (316).

The women are relegated, silenced creatures in the narrative of *Benang* and simply act as machines and vehicles for creating a "pure" first white man. The women are either non-entities, or objects of gaze and desire or body machines that suddenly disappear. The last is the case with Harley's own mother: "It may be that a reader is wondering about my own mother, especially in such a story of men, with silent women flitting in the background" (400). The grave irony lies in the fact that in the colonial discourse women have been denied the identity of a mother - it is the Ern/Neville like colonizers who manipulate the process of creation. Ern's relationship with Kathleen (Ern's first wife) and Topsy (Ern's child bride and illegitimate daughter of Kathleen by Sergeant Hall) brings out the objectification in the male gaze and machine-like treatment for procreation as promulgated by the eugenicist policy.

Dinah's daughter Kathleen is given in marriage to Ernest Solomon Scat by Sergeant Hall as she became pregnant by Hall while working as his domestic help. This was unbeknown to Scat and later when he finds out that Topsy born to Kathleen is not his daughter he goes to a hospital (for Topsy suffers from a crack in the skull as she slips of the hands of Scat or perhaps Scat purposely wounds her), places her there with a note that the father of the child is a police officer and comes back home without Topsy. Later when Kathleen bears no male child with Scat, Scat turns a lustful eye towards Topsy who by this time has reached puberty and is a house maid at Scat's. By this time Kathleen has become a redundant object for Scat. Having discovered that Scat has made sexual advances towards Topsy, Jack punches Scat in retaliation. As a consequence both Kathleen and Jack are moved away to a reserve stating their excessive influence over the Aborigines as an official reason. Fathered by a white man, Topsy is now a better bodythat can give birth to a male child:

Topsy was young, and small, and as fine-boned as a bird. She looked exotic, her hair sometimes seemed almost golden, and she spoke and moved with remarkable elegance given the limited tutoring he had given her. She seemed... almost a new species. (135)

Ern starts shaping Topsy as a white woman making her understand the meaningless existence of the Blacks and the elevated stature of the whites. In due course Topsy gives birth to Tommy, but to Scat's chagrin he cannot be dubbed as 'the first white man born' because by that time the law regarding as to who might to dubbed 'white' has changed. Out of frustration Scat is all set to turn

Topsy fully white. He pours bleach in hot water and forcefully makes Topsy take a bath in it. This shatters Topsy's identity. The one character that remain unfailingly strong and holds to her Aboriginality in the text is Fanny. Fanny (her original name being *Benang Pinyan Wonyin*) forms the primary source of Noongar information for Harley.

In the novel Fanny forms the lynchpin of Aboriginal source of strength and succour around which Noongar culture moves. Along with her daughter Harriette, Fanny rescues the children born out of rape of Noongar women by white men. She takes care of them and protects them from being stolen by the white administrators. She not only educates them in the modern style but also tells them the Dreamtime stories at night campfires (she also draws symbols in the sand for them and teaches them how to hunt and to follow traces) that help nourish the intrinsic Noongar values. One of the stories that she hands down is that of the Curlew, a story that repeats itself in various ways in the novel. We even find Harley taking his children to Dubitj Creek where they hear the cry of Curlew. This survival of a story is indicative of a survival of a culture amidst the attempts at cultural destructions. But many of Fanny's stories are about the stealing of children by the Aboriginal officials, poverty of the Aborigines and their death and destruction: "Fanny Benang Mason saw her people fall"(493).

But reviving the stories of Fanny and the incidents witnessed by her comes as a cultural survival strategy for Harley who is set to recover his personal and community identity. If for Ern, the Aborigines were nothing more than objects on whom experiments could be carried out and consequent results documented and archived, then the experiences of Fanny sets the Aboriginal perspectives in proper place. The objectification of the Noongar people is witnessed in reducing them to a number and having a personal identification file against each of them and all these under the direction of Neville. The file of Sandy (Two) Mason describes him as a person who has "*the appearance of a half-caste, but is certainly lighter than usual.... he has a quite refined appearance, although he looks asick man, and this may account for lightness in colour*" (43). Sandy Two's residence is "*an ordinary house which from outward appearances is in good order, but no attempt is made to cultivate the ground surrounding the house*" (43). The observation about his house is a testimony given by Sandy Two's white neighbour Mustle. This observation by a white man reduces Sandy Two to nothing more than an object of scrutiny.

If Ern, through his eugenicist project and documentations has tried to wipe out the true Aboriginal experiences as was to be found in people like Fanny, then Harley's is a conscious attempt to rewrite his family history—history of the Noongar nation, culture and identity. Hence Harley decides to travel around the traditional Aboriginal country with his uncles—Jack and Will. It is the encouragement from them that makes Harley find out the Noongar spirit in him and speak for his community "from the heart". Harley's immediate link in his family history is his father Tommy—the child of Topsy and Scat. As a child (who could not be proclaimed as the 'first white man born' due to legal issues) Tommy (along with his sister Ellen) was placed in the custody of a mission—an institution run for the pale skin Aboriginal children by Sister Kate (who is modelled on Sister Kate Clutterbuck). What is strange is that the same Tommy hands over Harley, his son, to Ern, knowing fully well Ern's's abhorrent nature. An explanation is offered much later in the novel by Tommy to Harley, as to why at the age of seven he was handed down to Ern: "'I didn't know... What could I do? I had a wife, four littler kids, it was hard for them. Ern had money, the time. When he talked of a private school, and promised...Everything was just too much for me'" (432).

When Tommy dies in a car accident, Harley (who was driving the car) once again enters the custody of Ern, who by this time, is an old infirm man on wheelchairs with a pseudo-scientific racist project that has finally failed him. At his grandfather's place Harley is initially projected as a vulnerable creature filled with the guilt of having driven the car which met with the accident that killed his father. His guilt gets an expression through the tendency to harm himself. (Harley actually wounds himself with a knife). Harley's sense of guilt, trauma and helplessness is further intensified by his anger against Ern. Speaking about such a moment Harley says, "before my uncles came to save us" when "I slashed and cut words into my own skin" (37). But, with the help of Uncle Jack and Uncle Will, Harley begins to externalise his anger: "But I soon turned to my grandfather's flesh. I wanted to mark him, to show my resentment at how his words had shaped me" (37).

Harley snatches and ceases the agency of representation from Ern, he re-reads the family story and re-writes the family history by reading Ern's documented and archived history against the grain. He moves beyond his grandfather's directives. When Ern tells Harley to "Cut down the tree. Burn it, dig out its roots" (107) that threatens the house's foundations, Harley subverts this direction. Symbolically speaking, rather than perishing and destroying the family tree that Ern (or people like Ern —Neville, Sergeant Hall, Daniel Coolman) had mis-engineered, Harley will now recover it by comprehending it better "from the heart". Thus, begins Scott's *Benang*.

Check your progress 1

Q.1. Trace the "family tree" in Kim Scott's *Benang*.

Q.2. Write a note on the character of Fanny Benang with a focus on her contribution to keep Noongar culture alive.

5.4 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

5.4.1 BENANG AND ABORIGINAL IDENTITY

Formation and strengthening of identity for the Aboriginals during the post-contact period took place through two tactics: strategizing their own essentialities from time to time and thereby making a positivist political confrontation with the White hegemony (in the Spivakian way of "strategic essentialism"); or adopting the modern White culture only to 'mimic' and subvert the 'pedagogical' and thereby making a deconstructive resistance to the latter's all pervasive influence (in a Bhabhaesque way).

In *Benang* both these ways are employed by the Noongar community members to consolidate their identity. For example, oral narration (as seen in the stories recounted by Fanny, Will, Jack) is an essential cultural element of the Aboriginal mode of Dreamtime story-telling. Primarily used in recounting the mythical originating Dreamtime tales, these are now used in recounting the family history (especially of the lost-generation era) and eulogizing the heroes of their tribe who stood against the colonizers. This practice of oral tradition—a showcasing of essential Noongar element—is a matter of 'strategic essentialism' for bulwarking identity. But, the same oral stories when inscribed by Harley on pen and paper appropriate the western mode of documentation and thereby help the Aboriginals confront the whites, help the margin to speak back to the centre.

Rewriting the linear White-documented history (as is evident in Scat and Neville) from a Noongar perspective (by Harley/Scott) by deconstructing the racist and eugenicist archival materials; and a subsequent reviving of Noongar oral narrative tradition whose technique and content provide a rude “defamiliarizing” shock to the otherwise habitually accepted standard/canonical Eurocentric genre of novel become important in the Noongar identity formation. It is the writings of Neville and his grandfather Ern Solomon Scat (also the collection of photographs and newspaper articles) that form the basic archival material for Harley to reanalyse. Such writings create the documented history of a White modern nation that Scott/Harley appropriate and deconstruct to reveal the eugenicist discourse, pseudo-scientific claims of racial power and prejudices, assimilationist policies, homogenizing and stratifying mentalities, erasing or non-acknowledgement of Aboriginal individuality or subjectivity, genocidal schema of colonialism, capitalist agendas, Enlightenment philosophy and modernist/Eurocentric progress and development. In the process, Scott builds a counter-hi/story that revives an ethnic nation within a modern White nation—a force that needs to be reconciled within civic society in the future, in the coming tomorrow or what the Noongars call “Benang”.

The counter hi/story that Scott writes is a bricolage of multiple Noongar voices from the past and present. Thus, the novel becomes (as Lisa Slater asserts in her thesis) dialogic and intertextual. This multi-voiced narration that creates variegated topography within the textual frame is a dialogue generated contest between the colonizers and the colonized, subject and object, centre and margin, white and the Noongars, where the dominated group is able to transform and problematize the colonial/modern practices and assumptions. The archival texts on which *Benang* falls back are microcosmic manifestations of European/colonial/modern meta-narratives and which are then ‘written back’ (to use a term from Bill Ashcroft) by inserting hitherto excluded marginal hi/stories into it. Harley’s “simple family history, most local of histories” (*Benang* 10)—covering the life of four generations which he recovers from the records maintained by his grandfather Ern and the stories narrated by his uncles Will and Jack—in effect is his counter-hi/story that subverts Ern’s Nevillian eugenic project. This controlled breeding programme among Noongars, Ern felt would determine the birth of the “first white man” happen in his family. This Bhabhaesque ‘narration’ or ‘performing’ of the white state endorsed/regulated modern hidebound ideology is hence a counter-discourse. Harley’s memory, which is an amalgamation of varied ancestral and present voices of his community, runs across the stable/horizontal/pedagogical white documented history in a sly ‘performative’ manner creating constant slippages. Harley’s or Scott’s employment of storytelling technique may be in effect a strategy to bring to the fore the quintessential Aboriginal element and thus create a counter discourse to the linear documented history of the colonial whites, yet what makes the storytelling more unique is its employment of the elements of intertextuality, irony, allegory, magic realism and Aboriginal English.

If intertextuality comprises the use of the language of the state and its machineries, viz. newspaper articles, journals of State personnel, eugenicist records, and anthropological entries, then it also ventilates the polyphonic community voice through oral narratives and recollection of Noongar Elders. A major postcolonial stylization that adds a poetic, though politicized, flavour to Scott’s fiction is the use of irony and allegory. Scott’s deliberate choice of the name Ernest Solomon Scat is a scathing irony at the man himself. As a man, whatsoever ‘earnest’ his ‘Solomon’-like wise motives behind the White assimilationist projects were [“earnest by name and nature”— (*Benang* 40)], at the end for the Noongars he proved nothing more than a mere filthy ‘scat’—an animal dropping. The

image associated with 'white' is either that of blindness, vacuity ("In fact, the truth was there was nothing to see, except—right in front of my eyes—a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation." 13) or death ("I had come back from the dead world"—i.e. from the world of White people 15).

Postcolonial writings use allegory as a tool to re-interpret and re-visualize history by being an imperfect periphery copy and literary interpretation of the central 'Truth'. If for Paul de Mann an allegory is a "story of the failure to read" and all about "impossibility of reading" (205) then for Stephen Selmon, who while talking about the irony of allegory, it is the mean to "proceed beyond a 'determinist view of history' by revising, reappropriating, or reinterpreting history as a *concept*." (*Post Colonial* 159) Here Harley himself a failure of the State generated modern eugenicist project. He himself is an irony and mimicry to the concept of the "first White man born" (*Benang* 12). Scott's use of Dreamtime elements—that essentially comprises telling of stories, myths and narrative—is further given a postcolonial turn by readjusting it to "magic realism". Scott was ostensibly influenced by Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*—a master postcolonial magic realist writer—in writing *Benang* (K. Kunhikrishnan). Kim Scott transforms Harley to a 'Marban'—a man of the world of 'Maban' reality¹. He becomes the 'floating narrator' of the novel with ability to fly across Noongar history and his own ancestry, conjuring up all at once the past and present. Scott's technique of linking two disparate time frames is highlighted by Linnell Seacombe (97):

When Kathleen found Ern embracing Topsy, bending her over their matrimonial bed with her skirts all bunched up...

Kathleen did not slam doors, did not stamp her feet. She was in the dusty street, near where – so many years ago – her Auntie Harriette had run toward the violence, not understanding her own terror. Harriette had been only a toddler, and her father, Sandy One, had chased her, caught her, thrown her to Fanny who had quickly hidden her away.

Now it was Jack, who – seeing Kathleen striding into the distance – ran after his sister. (*Benang* 133)

Here Scott (as Lisa Slater also reminds) link two scenes of violence inflicted by the colonizers on the Noongars with a vast time gap between them—gin busting and removal of children—within the same text thereby hinting how the race relations were founded on hatred and hostility and perpetrated ever since. Moreover, the magic realist image of flight (at various points in the text we are told that Harley has the propensity to fly) disassociates Harley from his Noongar reality. His propensity to 'drift' and 'elevate' owes much to white education. Even Harley agrees that he fails to internalize the rhythms of Noongar language dialects due to his rootlessness. Here, the Aboriginal concept of 'Dreamtime' stories is thought to be the true reality and 'modern' reality a dream that makes him float. Finally, the use of Aboriginal English in *Benang* is another important subversive technique that Scott brings to fore. Rightly Chiara Minestrelli observes:

Scott, like many other Indigenous writers, cannot completely avoid "Western contamination"; nevertheless he makes judicious use of language, trying to create a personal narrative which diverts from tradition. The linguistic choices exploited in *Benang* take on the dominant language to shake the readers' expectations to their

foundations. Scott never flings an accusation at the Anglo-Establishment, but he cleverly tries to appeal a wider readership by demonstrating that he has mastery over the “colonizers’ language”. Standard English is declined into many different forms so as to fulfil Scott’s stylistic aspirations, as well as a more practical purpose: the narration shifts from the formal English of documents and official letters to everyday language. The characters’ thoughts are expressed via colloquial language, sometimes reflected through incorrect spelling, such as, for instance: “He was gunna retire” (Scott, 1999: 442), “Looks like him, unna?” (Scott, 1999: 450). This mood is further enhanced by dint of interjections, embedded clauses, coarse language and a frequent change in narrator, which may create a sense of displacement in the reader. Scott challenges his white readership to abandon preconceptions and empathise with the characters. Accordingly, the attentive reader is charged with the task of making connections and revealing secret patterns behind every story. (96)

Hence, it is in this way that the identity of the Aboriginals/Noongars are consolidated by Scott in *Benang*. In the final analysis, *Benang* is a novel about continuous cultural resistance to the White Australian nation and thereby about cultural survival of the Noongars. The novel is not an end result rather a process of constant strategization to keep on re-inscribing identity. As “Benang” is the Noongar term for “tomorrow”, the novel establishes itself as the futuristic projection for hope to usher in. It is about the spirit of continuation amidst decimation and devastation: “...I know this story will not conclude with my death.” (*Benang* 355) The last line of the novel reads: “We are still here, Benang.” (497) The line in its wake, most non-obliquely, reminds us of the famous poem of self-conviction by Oodgeroo (Kath Walker)—“We are Going”.

Check your progress 2

1. Comment on the Aboriginal identity construction in *Benang*
2. Write a note on the narrative technique of Kim Scott’s *Benang*.
3. Discuss Scott’s use of intertextuality in *Benang*.
4. Comment on the white Australian colonial policies that Scott writes against in *Benang*.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have thoroughly analysed Kim Scott’s *Benang*. We have tried to unravel the otherwise problematic family tree of the narrator and the evolution of the story. We have seen how *Benang* is about the survival of four generations of people (or perhaps even more than that) in the face of colonization, biological absorption, assimilation and cultural annihilation. The eugenicist project as promulgated by A.O. Neville and as put to practice by Ernest Solomon Scat is foiled at every turn by the Noongars through strategically promoting its essential qualities such as storytelling and appropriating European/white discourses such as writing. The attempt to create an all-white race by the colonizers and the historical documentation of the plan’s gradual progress is subverted by various characters (especially by the chief narrator Harley) at various moments. The act of rewriting history, from the Noongar vantage point, and thereby recalling the story is what *Benang* is all about. Further, to give a postcolonial resistive stance to the story Scott employs allegory, magic realism and irony as various narrative tools.

5.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

Q.1. Discuss the use of allegory, Magic Realism and Dreamtime elements in Kim Scott's *Benang*.

Q 2 "Benang is a polyphonic text." Comment.

Q.3. "Scott's *Benang* is a conscious deviation from standard English." Comment.

5.7 NOTES

1. Aboriginal storytelling exemplifies what Mudrooroo terms in *The Indigenous Literature of Australia* as "Maban reality" or "an acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality" (97), a commonplace element that signifies not hallucinatory flight of the imagination—an escapist tendency, but a truth beyond the mundane and quotidian appearances.

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