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Questions of ambivalence, conflict and redemption in Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*

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Abstract

The cultural crisis for Australian aboriginal people is characterized by this ambivalence between a bioregional way of life and the newly consolidated framework of a standardized, centralized culture of a nation. The ambivalent state has its further cultural implication as it problematizes the prospect of redemption for the aboriginal communities. In the post-interventionist ear the question of cultural redemption for aboriginal communities has dual implications - either remembering and reviving old spatial ties or forgetting old values and immersing into new cultural formations. If remembering involves continuation and survival of culture, in oppositional and equal terms forgetting also involves cultural shifts. The problematic duel between inner turmoil and redemption will be discussed through a reading of Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2012).

Keywords: Ambivalence, memory, aboriginal, identity, redemption

Introduction

Set in the backdrop of the first encounter between Europeans and aboriginal Noongar people on the southern coast of Western Australia, Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* narrates cross-cultural exchange and mutual relationship characterising black/white contacts in the early days of colonisation in King George Town. Despite differences in perceptions of the land and more specifically the region of King George Town, it is worthwhile to note that the first contact between the Europeans settlers and the Noongar aboriginals marks a phase of cross-cultural exchange and mutual friendship. In this connection, very often, the southern coast of Western Australia is "known by some historians as 'friendly frontier'" (Scott 351). The atmosphere of the friendly frontier can be comprehended in terms of the acceptance by the aboriginal Noongar of the European language, cultural forms and ways of life. Apparently a happy and smooth intermingling between the Noongar aboriginal cultural forms with the European language and civilisation, it is deciphered, would initiate the growth of a society of multicultural elements. It is noteworthy that the friendly initial phase of contact between the European settlers and the Noongar natives defers the impending conflict between two completely different ways of dwelling in a place, and the protagonist of the novel Bobby Wabalanginy marks this phase of harmony through his learning of the European settlers' language and prompt appropriation of new cultural forms, and practices. Initially it seems that Bobby can move freely between the two worlds of the Noongar aboriginals and the European settlers without suffering any inner conflict. Without relinquishing his Noongar aboriginal values to what extent Bobby can embrace the world of European civilisation is something that invites critical attention. Caterina Colomba in her essay "Kim Scott's Dialogue Across Cultures in *That Deadman Dance*" observes that Bobby Wabalanginy's character embodies cross cultural communication, and in this process "Bobby's connection to his people is never questioned and his association to the land remains spiritual and strong" (Colomba 300). To Colomba, in Bobby the values of two different worlds never collide, and he exemplifies a self that incorporates multicultural elements without any inner conflict and pangs of cultural loss.

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The two different worlds, however, do not collide one with another within Bobby; indeed, he easily moves between and across them, representing in the novel the most powerful example of cross-cultural communication. (Colomba 300).

In her reading of *That Deadman Dance*, Colomba tries to establish that Booby is a character who imbibes the shared history of a positive relationship between the Noongar aboriginal people and the European settlers thereby carving a way for a future multicultural Australian society. In this connection Colomba also comments that Bobby's character evinces Kim Scott's stance as an aboriginal writer. It is observed that in Bobby's character Scott fuses cross-cultural dimensions, and in doing so he does not limit his writing within the aboriginal perspective. Being reluctant to get entrapped in the paradigm of aboriginal resistance, according to Colomba, is indicative of Scott's fervor of envisaging a positive multicultural relationship between Noongar aboriginal people and European settlers.

He does not simply limit himself to re-writing the colonial past from an Aboriginal perspective, and thereby risking being trapped in the polemical paradigm of resistance. Aboriginal people have been dispossessed and displaced (geographically, linguistically and culturally) but, instead of exclusively denouncing past injustices, Scott uses creative writing to re-establish a connection with the spirit of the place going back to those (although rare) moments of 'shared history' in an attempt to restore positive relationships and stimulate new understandings. (Colomba 301).

The positive relationships between natives and European settlers, however, experience rift, and Bobby's initial generosity and cooperation with the newcomers in his land is marred by a gradual sense of doubt and cultural loss. The phase of friendly frontier precipitates a complete demographic and ecological takeover of the Noongar region, and it is significant that the natives realize, though the realization dawns in them very late, that their bioregional relation with their land is irrevocably threatened by the profit-seeking motive of outsiders. Therefore, overemphasis on positive relationships between natives and European settlers, as done by Caterina Colomba in her essay, would be a partial interpretive stance of ignoring the novel's glaring representation of the inner conflict and sense of loss experienced by the Noongar natives due to their generosity and cooperation towards the settlers. No doubt the distinctly different worlds of the Noongar and the Europeans initially do not collide in Bobby; however, when the Noongar bioregion of southern coast of Western Australia has been transformed into a whaling colony of King George Town Bobby's feeling of positive relationship with the settlers is gradually replaced by self-doubt and irrevocable cultural loss. Bobby's personality evolves from this cross-cultural contention, and he oscillates between his childhood positive relationship with the Europeans and his adult sense of remorse and loss.

The narrative of *That Deadman Dance* limns the protagonist Bobby Wabalanginy's growth, though not in a chronological manner, from his childhood to adulthood, and in this connection the novel can be read as a bildungsroman in which Bobby's character progresses from a state of cross-

cultural harmony to a state of self-doubt and cultural loss. His childhood witnesses the growth of a healthy relationship of mutual respect and harmony between the Noongar natives and the white settlers. It is a phase when people from both the communities are ready for a cultural exchange, and there is an overwhelming atmosphere of learning from each other. The fervor of a positive relationship motivates young people like Bobby to consider that the dichotomies of colonizer/colonized, black/white, civilized/uncivilized might collapse. The shared experience of a friendly relationship between the natives and the settlers is exhibited by Bobby's uncle Wunyeran and Dr. Cross, one of the colonial officials.

They sang to one another. Wunyeran initiated it, Cross accepting. It was a way to communicate, to say more of oneself than was possible with their limited shared vocabulary. Cross sang pieces from childhood, anthems and ballads, Auld Lang Syne and bawdy sea shanties. Nevertheless, his repertoire was soon exhausted, but Wunyeran was enthusiastic hear them again and again and soon sang along. (Scott 115).

The reciprocity visible in the Wunyeran-Dr. Cross relationship acts as a bridge between two entirely different cultures, and at the same time it inspires the young Noongar men like Bobby to accept the white settlers' culture and language without any question or fear. Bobby's extraordinary talent is visible as he learns to write and read English within a few months: "within a few months Wabalanginy spoke English better than Wunyeran ever had, and of course it was English he was learning to read and write" (Scott 140). Dr. Cross appreciates Bobby's command over English as a manifestation of a growing positive relationship between the natives and the European settlers: "the young boy's command of English was remarkable - a tribute to the good relationship at King George Town - and he was confident and charming, quite precocious, in fact" (Scott 24). Dr. Cross's emphasis on the good relationship carries dual implications. On the one hand, it motivates further smooth migration of Europeans in the southern coast of Western Australia, and on the other it reflects on unawareness of the natives of the crisis looming over their land. Unhindered and unhesitating acceptance of the white European cultural forms and language manifests the Noongar simplicity and innocence, and that is why Bobby displays no fear in adapting the language, dress-code and food habits of the newcomers.

No, laughing and loved, Bobby Wabalanginy never learned fear, least not until he was pretty well a grown man. He never really had no sense of a single self, because... Well, he was young and he was like a spear, thrown and quivering in the air and only the pointed tip, that very spirit of a spear, remains still. (Scott 140).

The absence of fear in young Bobby is conveyed through the image of a spear. The way the pointed tip of a spear hits its target with unshaken stillness in the same manner young Bobby's mind does not dwell upon any fear. However, by the time he attains his maturity Bobby's initial positive and innocent acceptance of the European settlers is replaced by a strong sense of doubt and self-reproaching anxiety, and this happens because within a short period of time the Noongar bioregion is demographically and ecologically taken over by

the settlers. The initial camaraderie is shifted to a relationship of entrepreneur and servant, and this shift in relationship corresponds to transformation of the Noongar life-place into a whaling colony.

Anne Brewster in her essay “Whiteness and Indigenous Sovereignty in Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance*” observes that the prospect of a positive cross-cultural entanglements and engagements does not last long, and what follows is white settlers’ deliberate withdrawal from such cross-cultural engagements. To Brewster, the short period of positive relationship is utilized as a window of opportunity by the white settlers so as to consolidate both their political and economic positions in the Noongar region.

It (*That Deadman Dance*) explores both the positive and productive potential of cross-racial entanglements and engagements, and also the impact of white people’s withdrawal from these productive engagements. While the novel overtly suggests that the ‘friendly frontier’ was indeed, in some measure, typified by courteous relations I’d suggest that this courtesy constituted a small window of opportunity and one that was, within a short space of time, squandered by the white settlers. *That Deadman Dance* imaginatively documents the subsequent subjection of the Noongar to the structuring sovereign violence of the colonial settler regime. (Brewster 62).

The shift in relationship is observed when the settlers achieve complete control over the region through establishment of Kepalup farm for agricultural plantation and sheltering of livestock animals, and this is further supplemented by whaling voyages and increasing number of settlers in the region. Very soon the charge of the young settler colony is taken over by Mr. Geordie Chaine, an aspiring entrepreneur who wants to have his trading empire in the Noongar bioregion, and with this intention he makes it clear “what he wants. Profits, not prophets” (Scott 258). With the sea-change in attitude of the settlers it is observed that the Noongar aboriginals are rather demystified at the prospect of positive cross-cultural engagements. The natives are frustrated as their cooperation and friendly involvements are manipulated by the white settlers to gain their trading control over the land and its physical environment.

The white people’s relationship with the Noongar becomes increasingly distanced and militarized throughout the course of the novel as the Noongar are denied access to their land, stripped of their weapons, subject to various prohibitions and to intimidation, violence and incarceration. The novel maps the ‘progress’ of colonization as a process in which the Noongar become enmeshed in a system of acculturative violence. (Brewster 62).

The ecologically determined governance of the Noongar is replaced by a stringent framework of political and economic administration of managing Kings George Town. Within this newly institutionalized framework, seasonal mobility the Noongar people is restricted as the region has been systematized with allotments of lands for human settlement, agricultural plantation, pastures and farms for animals. It is at this juncture that the protagonist of the novel Bobby Wabalanginy is disillusioned with his initial positive

impression of the cross-cultural engagements as his community people are reduced to the position of laborers in their own land. The rest of the narrative traces Bobby’s disillusionment and sense of cultural loss from his adulthood to his old age.

Bobby’s unwavering boyhood involvement with the settlers shifts into inner conflict and remorse in his adulthood. Though he cannot kill a whale, as a boy he uses to show the sea passage of whales to the whale-hunters: “Bobby had no part in these things. He could find whales, and could chase and run with them. But his hands could not kill a whale. He was only steerer” (Scott 281). His bioregional cultural underpinning does not allow the killing of a whale but he steers the European whale-hunters in the sea, an act for which Bobby suffers inner-conflict. It is significant to note that initial positive relationship is characterized by the natives steering the ways of the settlers in exploring the region. Whether it is Bobby or his uncle Wunyeran or even the Noongar headman Menak, everyone plays the role of a steerer in helping the newcomers to accumulate comprehensive information on the trading prospect of the region. Without anticipating the outcome the natives steer the settlers to make their inroads in the region, and it is this fatal ignorance or so as to say a momentary suspension of the Noongar bioregion culture that constitutes the crux of the inner conflict. The Noongar are biocentrically connected to all ecological entities of the region, but when they guide the settlers in grabbing land and whale-hunting it is as if for the sake of the growing positive relationship the native for a short period of time prefer to forget their bioregional values. It is due to this momentary oblivion or suspension of their region-centric values that leads to the transformation of the place into a trading and whaling colony. Therefore, the sense of loss of the natives is characterized by their remorse at what they should not have done. This is evident when the native headman Menak complains to the white settlers, and Bobby translates it into English in this way.

Kokinjeri mamang ngalakatang...

Bobby tried to translate: My people need their share of these sheep, too. We share the whales, you camp on our land and kill our kangaroos and tear up our trees and dirty our water and we forgive, but now you will not share your sheep and my people are hungry and wait here because of you... (Scott 302).

Menaka’s emphasis on forgiveness, though apparently referring to the act of forgiving the settlers, at a deeper cultural level refers to a phase or a period of time when the Noongar aboriginal people within their bioregional framework of culture allows the nature-damaging activities spearheaded by the settlers. The phase of forgiveness points to that period in the Noongar history when they are momentarily oblivious of their bioregional culture and for which they have to suffer. Forgiveness is indicative of the remorse of the natives. Bobby’s progression from adulthood to old age can be comprehended as a journey caught in remorse and conflict. His boisterous boyhood participation in the activities of the colonizers is replaced by adult skepticism towards the intruding alien civilization. Nevertheless, he accepts that cross-cultural engagements and inculcate certain embellishments of European way of life which he cannot easily erase from his persona. At the same time, he is very much conscious of his Noongar cultural roots and the responsibility it involves.

I change, doesn't mean I forgot all about my people and their ways. But some people come to live here, wanna stay like they never moved away from their own place. Sometimes I dress like you people, but who here I ever see naked like my people? (Scott 347).

The two worlds collide in the adult Bobby, and this collision is the manifestation of his disapproval of his own childhood acceptance of the positive cultural exchange between the Noongar people and the white settlers. His remorse over his past affinity is the reflection of his mature realization that the Noongar aboriginal people are fundamentally different from the European settlers in the ways of dwelling in a place.

One time, with Mr. Cross, he share his food and his beds with us, because he say he our guest. But not now... But now not like that, and sheep and bullock everywhere and too many strangers wanna take things for themselves and leave nothing. Whales nearly all gone now, and the men that kill them they gone away, too, and now we can't even walk up river away from the sea in cold rainy time. Gotta walk around fences and guns, and sheep and bullock get the goodest water. They messing up the water, cutting the earth. What, we can't kill and eat them? And we now strangers to our special places. (Scott 347).

Bobby's regret coalesces with his denunciation of what the settlers have done to their land. The inner turmoil in Bobby delineates his incapacity to understand the hidden scheme of the colonizers. Bobby's inner turmoil finds its expression in his public condemnation of the disregard shown to the ways of living of the natives by the newcomers: "because you need to be inside the sound and the spirit of it to live here properly. And how can that be, without we people who have been here for all the time" (Scott 349)? The irrevocable loss to the Noongar culture and place cannot be restored, and to a certain extent Bobby holds himself responsible for this as it is he who, without trying to understand the vicious motive of the European settlers, 'steers' their ways. That is why Old Bobby pensively confesses to the tourists.

He talked to the tourists, grateful for their ears. Staring down their smiles, he told of himself and other pioneers of those who were once his friends and though at that time he did not understand them or know their thoughts, he does now. He understands them now. (Scott 141).

From the above discussion it becomes evident that post-interventionist cross-cultural engagements push the aboriginal people to the brink of cultural disaster. The policy of acculturating aboriginal people with modern education, ways of life and institutionalised religious faith creates turmoil and cultural ambivalence, and a way out of this oscillation and conflict lies in an aboriginal individual's return to his old connection with his land. The discussion on Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* highlights the positive aspect of this state of cultural ambivalence and conflict. The positive underpinnings of this struggle rest upon the way the aboriginal protagonists release themselves from this ambivalence, and renew their bonding with their bioregional cultural values.

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