

## Aboriginal Voices in Australian Literature

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### ABSTRACT

The paper “Aboriginal Voices in Australian Literature” provides a comprehensive overview of the rich cultural heritage and struggles of Aboriginal Australians, with a focus on their representation in literature, particularly through the works of Kim Scott. It delves into the historical context of colonization and its devastating impacts on Aboriginal communities, highlighting themes of cultural preservation, identity, and resistance. The paper examines the complexities of Aboriginal life before and after European contact, exploring issues such as forced assimilation, language loss, and the ongoing challenges faced by Indigenous peoples. Through an analysis of Scott's novels, including *True Country*, *Benang*, and *That Deadman Dance*, the paper elucidates the author's efforts to reclaim Aboriginal narratives and revitalize cultural traditions amidst the pervasive effects of colonialism. Additionally, the abstract touches upon the broader themes of postcolonialism, Indigenous rights, and the imperative of preserving Aboriginal languages and cultures for future generations.

### KEYWORDS

Aboriginal; Kim Scott; colonialism; postcolonialism; Noongar.

### Introduction

For over 65,000 years, Aboriginal Australians have thrived on the continent, boasting a rich tapestry of culture and heritage. With over 250 unique language groups, they epitomize diversity and resilience. Despite constituting only 3 percent of the population, their impact is profound and their fate is a subject of contentious debate. From social inequalities to questions of legal justice, the plight of Australia's Indigenous peoples reverberates through history (Dellbrugge, 87). The term genocide looms large in discussions, challenging perceptions and demanding recognition of past injustices.

Aboriginal Australians are split into two groups: Aboriginal peoples, who are

related to those who already inhabited mainland Australia when Britain began colonizing the island in 1788, and Torres Strait Islanders, who descend from residents of the Torres Strait Islands, a group of islands that was annexed by Queensland, Australia in 1879. B. Atwood highlights in this connection:

Legally, “Aboriginal Australian” is recognized as “a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he [or she] lives.” (81)

In 2017, a genetic study found that today's First Nations people are all related

to a common group of ancestors, members of a distinct population that emerged on the mainland about 50,000 years ago (C. D. Rowley 239). How did they get there? Humans are thought to have migrated to Northern Australia from Asia using primitive boats. A current theory holds that those early migrants themselves came out of Africa about 70,000 years ago, which would make them the oldest population of humans living outside Africa.

When British settlers began colonizing Australia in 1788, between 750,000 and 1.25 million Aboriginal Australians are estimated to have lived there. Soon, epidemics ravaged the island's indigenous people, and British settlers seized their lands.

Though some First Nations people did resist—up to 20,000 people died in violent conflict on the colony's frontiers—most were subjugated by massacres and the impoverishment of their communities as British settlers seized their lands. Researchers have documented at least 270 massacres of Aboriginal Australians during Australia's first 140 years, and though the term "genocide" remains controversial, people related to the continent's first inhabitants are widely considered to have been wiped out through violence (G.G. Frederick Rose 193).

Between 1910 and 1970, government policies of assimilation led to between 10 and 33 percent of Aboriginal Australian children being forcibly removed from their homes. These "Stolen Generations" were put in adoptive families and institutions and forbidden from speaking their native languages. Their names were often changed. G.G. Frederick Rose explains:

Most First Nations people did not have full citizenship or voting rights until 1965. Only in 1967 did Australians vote that federal laws also would apply to Aboriginal

Australians. This meant that Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders would be counted as part of Australia's population and that Australia could make laws they were obliged to obey. (231)

Stan Grant is a Wiradjuri elder of Australia's second-largest Aboriginal community—and one of only a handful of people who still speak the tribal language, which nearly died out in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Aboriginals could be jailed for speaking their native tongue in public.

In 2023, Australians overwhelmingly rejected a national referendum that would have both recognized Aboriginal people in its constitution and established an advisory group to weigh in on relevant issues in Parliament. Though a majority of Indigenous voters said yes to the proposal, more than 60 percent of Australians voted no on the measure (E. Scott 145). The referendum's failure was seen as a blow by many Aboriginal Australians, who proclaimed a week of silence and reflection on its wake.

Aboriginal languages form one of the world's most diverse linguistic families, comprising hundreds of distinct languages and dialects across Australia. These languages are classified into major groups like Pama-Nyungan, Yolngu Matha, and Kimberley languages, each with its own distinct characteristics and geographical distribution. Integral to the Aboriginal identity is their profound spiritual and cultural bond with the land, referred to as "Country" (Stearns 581). Traditional knowledge systems, oral histories, and Dreamtime narratives, passed down through generations, intricately weave together the connections between Aboriginal communities, the land, and all forms of life, embodying a profound respect for their environment and heritage. C. D. Rowley rightly says:

Aboriginal cultures encompass a rich tapestry of artistic expressions, including storytelling, dance, music, visual arts, and ceremonial practices. Traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable land management practices are integral to many Aboriginal societies, reflecting a deep understanding of and respect for the natural environment. (236)

### **Noongar People: The Largest Aboriginal Cultural Blocks in Australia**

Noongar means “a person of the south-west of Western Australia” or the name for the “original inhabitants of the south-west of Western Australia” (Ronald and Berndt 145) and they are one of the largest Aboriginal cultural blocks in Australia. The Noongar are Aboriginal Australians who live in the southwest corner of Western Australia. Their lore is unwritten and refers to *kaartdijin* (knowledge), beliefs, rules, or customs. Noongar lore is linked to kinship and mutual obligation, sharing, and reciprocity (Ronald and Berndt 148)

The Noongar have strong spiritual beliefs that govern their views of the world. Mythical creatures, stories, and obligations are associated with many geographical features of their landscape (Donnelly 90). Strict protocols apply to visitors, who are expected to announce their arrival, bring food and goods in exchange for access to the land, and pay due respect to the land and its custodians. M Ronald, and Catherine M Berndt aptly mention:

The Noongar people, Aboriginal Australians residing in the southwest corner of Western Australia, inhabit a vast territory stretching from Geraldton on the west coast to Esperance on the south coast. Within the Noongar cultural bloc, there exist 14 distinct groups: Amangu, Ballardong, Yued,

Kaneang, Koreng, Mineng, Njakinjaki, Njunga, Pibelman, Pindjarup, Wadandi, Whadjuk, Wiilman, and Wudjari. These groups collectively refer to their land as Noongar boodja, emphasizing their deep-rooted connection to their ancestral territories and cultural heritage. (153)

The members of the collective Noongar cultural block descend from people who spoke several languages and dialects that were often mutually intelligible (Haebich 127). What is now classified as the Noongar language is a member of the large Pama–Nyungan language family. Contemporary Noongar speak Australian Aboriginal English (a dialect of the English language) laced with Noongar words and occasionally inflected by its grammar. Most contemporary Noongar trace their ancestry to one or more of these groups (Donnelly 98). In the 2011 Australian census, 10,549 people identified as indigenous in the south-west of Western Australia. By 2021, this number had increased to 14,355.

At the time of European settlement, it is believed that the peoples of what became the Noongar community spoke thirteen dialects, of which five still have speakers with some living knowledge of their respective versions of the language (Donnelly 45). No speakers use it over the complete range of everyday speaking situations, and the full resources of the language are available only to a few individuals.

The Noongar people exhibit a profound understanding of their environment, reflected in their recognition of six distinct seasons determined by observable changes in climate. These seasons, ranging from dry periods lasting three to eleven months, underscore their intimate connection to the land (Donnelly 108). Their territories

span diverse geological formations, including coastal plains, plateaus, and plateau margins, characterized by relatively infertile soil. Vegetation varies across these regions, with casuarina, acacia, and melaleuca thickets prevalent in the north, while mulga scrubland dominates the south, interspersed with dense forest stands. Abundant rivers, lakes, and wetlands enrich their traditional food and vegetation resources, shaping their cultural practices and sustenance strategies over generations.

Generally, Noongar made a living by hunting and trapping a variety of game, including kangaroos, possums and wallabies; for people close to the coastal zone or riverine systems, spear-fishing or culling fish in traps was customary (Donnelly 114). An extensive range of edible wild plants were also available, including yams and wattle seeds. Nuts of the zamia palm, eaten during the Djeran season (April–May) required extensive treatment to remove their toxicity, and for women, they may have had a contraceptive effect. As early as 10,000 BP local people utilised quartz, replacing chert flint for spear and knife edges when the chert deposits were submerged by sea level rise during the Flandrian transgression.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the Noongar population has been variously estimated at between 6,000 and some tens of thousands. Colonisation by the British brought both violence and new diseases, taking a heavy toll on the population. The Noongar, like many other Aboriginal peoples, saw the arrival of Europeans as the returning of deceased people, often imagining them as relatives who deserved accommodation. As they approached from the west, the newcomers were called djaanga (or djanak), meaning "white spirits" (Donnelly 118).

Initially, interactions between European settlers and the Noongar people were marked by cordiality, with Matthew

Flinders acknowledging the diplomatic efforts of the Noongar. Their ceremonial rituals celebrated the arrival of newcomers, fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect. However, as settlement intensified, tensions arose over conflicting perceptions of land use and reciprocity. Misunderstandings, such as the Noongar land-management practice of early summer fires, were misconstrued as hostile acts by settlers, fueling sporadic clashes. Conversely, settlers' indiscriminate hunting of native animals led Noongar to view settler livestock as legitimate replacements. Despite attempts at usurping native land, the area around the Murray River resisted settlement, hindering expansion for nearly half a decade, illustrating the complexities of early interactions between cultures.

Noongar culture is particularly strong with the written word. The plays of Jack Davis are on the school syllabus in several Australian states. Davis' first full-length play *Kullark*, a documentary on the history of Aboriginals in WA, was first produced in 1979 (Cowlshaw 45). Other plays include: *No Sugar*, *The Dreamers*, *Barungin: Smell the Wind*, *In Our Town* and for younger audiences, *Honey Spot* and *Moorli and the Leprechaun*. Kim Scott won the 2000 Miles Franklin Award for his novel *Benang* and the 2011 award for *That Deadman Dance*. Yirra Yaakin describes itself as the response to the Aboriginal community's need for positive self-enhancement through artistic expression. It is a theatre company that strives for community development and which also has the drive to create "exciting, authentic and culturally appropriate indigenous theatre" (Cowlshaw 60).

Post colonial literature often addresses the problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country, especially questions related to the political and cultural independence of formally subjugated people and themes such as racism and colonialism. Frantz

Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) and *Wretched of the Earth* (1967) and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1993) are considered to be the pioneer works of postcolonial theory. Their works have strongly recommended recouplement of the past of the colonized territories only to subvert the hegemony of the colonial nations. Bill Ashcraft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* is an important document that provides a strong base for post-colonial criticism. This movement is further continued by Gayatri Spivak Chakravarthi. Her path-breaking work *In Other World: Essays in Cultural Politics* talks about the ways in which dominant discourses and ideologies shape the understanding of culture, identity, and subjectivity- particularly those of women, within cultural and literary narratives. Drawing on her background in literary theory and postcolonial studies, Spivak offers analyses of texts from both Western and non-Western traditions, challenging readers to reconsider prevailing assumptions and perspectives.

Colonial, postcolonial and Aboriginal elements are deeply imbibed by the ancient and contemporary writers of Australia. At the time of early colonization Indigenous Australians had not developed a system of writing. The Aboriginal people of Australia had developed a very rich oral literature which was disrupted and effaced by the Europeans. The first literary accounts of Aborigines came from the journals of early European explorers, which contain descriptions of first interface, both violent and friendly (Stearns 586).

"From what I have said of the Natives of New Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched upon the earth; but in reality, they are far happier than we Europeans" (323), wrote James Cook in his journal on 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 1770. Since then, Australian literature has developed and passed through several

stages. It has reserved an influential space in the area of world literature. The literature of Australia characteristically expresses collective values.

Even when the literature deals with the experiences of an individual, those experiences are very likely to be estimated in terms of the ordinary, the typical, the representative. It aspires on the whole to represent integration rather than disintegration. It does not favour heroism of individual action unless this shows dogged perseverance in the face of inevitable defeat. Although it may express a strong ironic disapproval of collective mindlessness (Haebich 45).

Adrian C. W. Mitchell writes in his book, *Australian Literature*.

Mateship, Egalitarianism, democracy, national identity, migration, Australia's unique location and geography, the complexities of urban living, 'the beauty and fear' of life in the Australian bush, assimilation of the natives are the recurring themes in Australian literature. Aboriginalism is also a unique and recurring theme in Australian fiction. At the time of the first colonization indigenous Australians had not developed a system of writing, so the first literary accounts of Aborigines came from the journals of early European explorers. (Adrian C. W. Mitchell 265)

David Unaipon was the first Aboriginal writer, who provided the first accounts of Aboriginal mythology, written by an Aboriginal: *Legendary Tales of the Aborigines*. Oodgroo Noonuccal was another famous Aboriginal poet, writer and activist who published the first Aboriginal book of verse, *We are Going*.

The voices of indigenous Australians are being raised in the works of playwrights like, Jack Davis and Kevin Gilbert. Writers coming to prominence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century include Kim Scott, Alexis Wright, and Kate Howarth (Stearns 589). These contemporary Australian writers celebrate their Aboriginal culture and there are elements of protest against the adulteration of culture consequent upon the hegemonic politics of assimilation and hybridity.

Indigenous Australians are the Aboriginal groups that existed in Australia before European Colonisation. Although Indigenous Australians are regeneralized as being of the 'Australian race', there are important distinctions between the various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups in terms of social cultural and linguistic customs. Estimates suggest that they have lived in Australia for 60 to 120 thousand years. During that time, they have offered remarkable wisdom that counter much of what we are taught in the West.

The Aboriginal people of Australia have a rich and diverse cultural heritage that spans thousands of years. Their unique cultures, rituals, and languages are deeply intertwined with their connection to the land and contain a wealth of knowledge accumulated over centuries of lived experience. The customs and traditions of Aboriginal communities reflect their intimate relationship with the natural environment and their deep spiritual connection to the land. Practices such as songlines (Wade 167), Dreamtime stories, and ceremonial rituals are integral to Aboriginal cultures, serving as repositories of knowledge, identity, and cultural continuity.

The languages spoken by Aboriginal peoples are also a testament to their rich cultural heritage, with hundreds of distinct languages and dialects once spoken across Australia. These languages encode complex systems of kinship, land

management, and spiritual beliefs, reflecting the deep cultural and linguistic diversity of Aboriginal societies. The knowledge and wisdom passed down through generations are invaluable contributions to human civilization, offering insights into sustainable living, ecological stewardship, and holistic approaches to well-being. Aboriginal customary law, known as lore, embodies ethical principles and community values that have sustained Indigenous societies for millennia.

The custodianship of the land, their rich oral traditions, and their enduring connection to Country are invaluable contributions to the textile of human diversity and heritage. It is essential to respect, protect, and preserve Aboriginal cultures and traditions for future generations, ensuring that their invaluable legacy continues to enrich our shared humanity. But after the European settlers landed, their unique culture and language started to be crushed and was not well-recognised. Assimilation and hybridity strategies have deformed the Aboriginal culture. After colonization the practising of the *whiteman's burden theory* can be seen (Mitchell 266). Aboriginal children were estranged from their mothers and were kept with white people for assimilation. They were forced to speak English and learn about new culture. The Aboriginal culture started to be obsolete. Such attempts of hegemonic assimilation were ruthless and immoral. Such attempts are still being practised directly or indirectly.

Aboriginal writers criticise the consequences of colonisation as Aboriginal literature begins as a cry from the heart directed at the whiteman. It is a cry for justice and for a better deal, a cry for understanding and an asking to be understood. The trauma of loss and displacement has been well documented in the following lines from Oodgeroo's poem "We are Going":

They came in to the little town  
A semi-naked band subdued and  
silent

All that remained of their tribe,  
They came here to the place of  
their old bora ground.

Where now the many white men  
hurry about like ants. (Noonuccal)

The response of Aboriginal literature to both colonization and subsequent assimilation has been critical. Aboriginal writers have raised questions against the politics of assimilation. The concept of assimilation is a political act of the master class in the name of Aboriginal welfare, aimed at the erasure of identity and cultural memory. Krishna Sen rightly points out:

Such political acts have been dealt with critically in the fiction of Kim Scott. The writer has once explained his relation behind taking up the pen to chart the course of himself and his people. The writing began, he clarifies, with the motivation of presenting his personal narrative or identifying his place in his own family history, which was a segment of wider social narrative of the subjugation of the Aboriginal people. (Sen 201)

The writings of Kim Scott, though never intended to be politicized by the author, enter into the public domain, embodying both a personal and public message, which speaks for both his own delusions and those of his Aboriginal community, though he was also disillusioned and lost, at their gradual moving away from traditional practices and rapid loss of identity, through the overpowering influence of colonizer's imperialistic designs and methods (Sen 205). He finds his Aboriginal community at the stage of decay, gradually moving away from their traditions, loss of the past

and accumulated wisdom of cultural roots. Therefore, he tries to recollect the past, his inheritance and giving voices to his people reaffirm, his and his community's identity, through a process of renegotiation in his works.

He departs from the European genre of the novel. It would encourage him to employ such techniques conceptualized by Bhabha as the use of non-linear narrative, magic realism and traditional oral methods of storytelling as well as oral language. Thus, in his works, the narrative moves forward and backward, from the chequered present to glorious past to even the uncertain future. He tries to seek out the true country for himself and his community. He tries to rewrite his glorious past and resuscitate his cultural roots.

In his novel, *True country*, he begins his journey by going to the remote town of Karnama to seek to be a part of the Aboriginal community living there. He takes first hand experiences of his great community and does not create an imaginary homeland. Like many others living in the community be set with problems, he is also at logger-heads with his attempts of reifying a meaningful cultural identity, which would allow him to recover both himself and his community from the wretched conditions. He does not run away from the predicaments while writing for his community, for his is a journey undertaken, a struggle initiated towards his ultimate goal.

*Benang* presents his search for Aboriginal mode of expression, through the magic realistic and ironic methods of story-telling. Moving beyond drab social realism, he tests the limits of his genre through innovative literary devices and places at the centre of his novel, the assimilation policies of A. O. Neville and the logic justifying colonialism and cultural subjugation. What he immediately realizes is that his Noongar people have

been far more advanced, progressive and modern for generations in the strict sense of the term than the white settler race.

*That Deadman Dance* explores the decades after the first contact between the Aboriginal Noongar people of Western Australia and European colonizers. The novel celebrates the magnificent ancient culture of the Noongar people. Lisa Slater pertinently affirms,

Kim Scott's work is an exploration of his own ancient traditions, language and systems which have undergone wretched conditions due to colonization. He tries to revive his glorious past and spread the accumulated knowledge of his own culture. (45)

British colonization directly affected all the aspects of Aboriginal society. Their land use, laws, rituals, spiritual beliefs and ways of life have been disrupted and dismantled. Aboriginal society has undergone the full force of invasion and it is arguable that traditional Aboriginal life and the supporting kinship structure have taken the maximum disruptive impact, especially in the areas of greatest non-Aboriginal population density. This is particularly evident in New South-Wales, Victoria and Tasmania where some groups have disappeared completely and others have been dislocated and no longer use their indigenous languages.

The lifestyle of Aboriginal people has irrevocably been changed due to the traumatic impact of European invasion and subsequent government policies. Most of the changes are the result of colonisers' bio-political actions which were aimed at taking control of the land, thus destroying family life as it existed in pre colonial Aboriginal society.

Despite all these things, Aboriginal kinship and family structure remain to be cohesive forces which bind Aboriginal people and provide them psychological

and emotional support. There is a tremendous difference in the lifestyle of Aboriginal people who live in caravans or impoverished homes with lack of money and other Australians who live in big houses and possess land. Colonisation wrested the land of Aboriginal people and changed their roles and stipulated new laws to instill Christianity. Self-esteem was destroyed as Aboriginal society disintegrated and traditional family life was no longer available.

After colonisation the natives were deprived of their land and languages and rituals and beliefs were thoroughly neglected. The impact of colonisation was very cruel. In the 1850s and 1860s it was generally considered that Aborigines were dying out and the numbers of Aborigines of mixed descent were increasing and were regarded as a nuisance for non-Aboriginal people. Thus, began a century of persecution of Aboriginal people in the name of the state. State protection Boards set about removing children from their parents so that they could be re-socialized in the Western manner (Slater 49). Many Aborigines died due to excessive drunkenness. It happened in the twentieth century when Aboriginal children were taken away from their families in the name of assimilation. This political act was cruel and immoral.

After two hundred years of colonization, Aboriginal culture and languages are still being neglected. In the name of assimilation this unique culture is being wiped out. Even the Aborigines are losing their languages and rituals. They feel hesitant and awkward in practising their own languages and traditions. As Nom Chomsky has said that "A language is not just words. It is a culture, a tradition, a unification of a community, a whole story that creates what a community is. It is all embodied in a language." (MultiLingual Media LLC) Language, rituals and social practices define a community, its past,



present and future. Indigenous languages and traditions need to be preserved.

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