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NAVIGATING ECOLOGICAL NARRATIVES OF THE ANTHROPOCENE IN KIM SCOTT'S THAT DEADMAN DANCE

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ABSTRACT

In the discourse of the Anthropocene, Scott's literary works have emerged as a prominent voice critiquing the current epoch characterized by degrading impact of colonisation on the environment. Scott deviates from the conventional storytelling by connecting personal narratives with broader ecological themes, urging the readers to reconsider the interconnectedness of colonial histories and its impact in the human and non-human lives of Australia. Through elaborate depictions of altered landscapes and after effects of colonisations, his narratives explore the relationship with the humans and the ecological sytems. This paper attempts to explore the ecological narratives of the Anthropocene as depicted in Scott's novel That Deadman Dance and also attempts to explore on the socio-political legacies of colonialism and capitalism that blurs the lines between history and fiction. This paper shall consider a re-reading of the novel from an ecological perspective that shall enable readers to engage deeply with the environmental narratives and reflect on the material consequences of colonialism. The methodology which is adopted for the study is qualitative in nature supported by data gathered from primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Global Histories, Interconnectedness, Ecological Narratives, Colonialism, History, Fiction

1. INTRODUCTION

Australia has had an average annual temperature increase of almost 1.4 °C since the turn of the 20th century, with warming occurring twice as quickly in the last 50 years as it did in the previous 50. Extremely hot weather and a severe drought in Australia have recently brought the government and general public's attention to the effects of climate change. Rainfall has dropped by 10–20% in Southwestern Australia since the 1970s. Climate change has varying effects on Australia's economy, agriculture, and public health. Indigenous Australians continue to face socio-economic disadvantages associated with colonial and post-colonial marginalization, making them more susceptible to the effects of climate change.

Aleksei Petrovich Pavlov, a Soviet geologist, proposed the word "Anthropocene" or "Anthropogene" in 1922 to refer to the epoch that followed the development of the first humans, around 160,000 years ago. Both words were used by Soviet scientists for a period, but they were never accepted by the rest of the world. The word was initially used in certain 1980s studies by marine researcher Eugene Stoermer, but it doesn't seem like anyone else has followed his lead. In

February 2000, atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen developed a new definition of the word during an International Geosphere-Biosphere Program conference in Cuernavaca, Mexico (Crutzen et. al 27).

Dedicated to nature, Australia's indigenous people rely on it for everything from clothing to food, housing, and medicine. Fascinatingly, the region's ongoing climatic change has been exacerbated by urbanization, the introduction of alien invasive species, and forest degradation, which has attempted to disturb the balance between man and environment. Because of the anthropocene's already dire consequences, it is no longer viewed as a distant doomsday. It is essential to comprehend the consequences of role reversals in which humans control nature. In his article "Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories" (2014), Dipesh Chakrabarty says that "we can become geological agents only historically and collectively" and "when we have reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large to have an impact on the planet itself" (Chakrabarty 12). Although in more indirect ways, the introduction of Europeans to Australia, starting with the First Fleet's arrival in 1788, had a substantial negative influence on the environment and accelerated climatic change in the area. Despite the widespread critical assumption that different fields of study are incompatible, this is not always the case, especially in Australia. The terra nullius myth, which asserted that Australia was "nobody's land" and was only refuted by the High Court of Australia in 1992, was a historical narrative that hid the complex ecological and cultural networks that comprised the world's oldest civilization.

This paper examines the environmental catastrophe and its impact on Aboriginal people in the novel That Deadman Dance written by Australian Aboriginal writer Kim Scott, a two-time Miles Franklin Literary Award winner. The novel That Deadman's Dance, a historical account of early contact between Aboriginal and early settlers on Western Australia's south coast, depicts cultural hybridization, identity crisis, dislocation, and the violent extinction of whales, which is an important container of the Noongar community's cultural memory. This study contends that European capitalistic goals constituted a threat to both human and non-human existence in Australia.

A masculinist 'civilising' objective centered on capitalist extraction and profit has underpinned centuries of patriarchal settler colonialism centred on the 'taming, domestication, and enslavement of Indigenous peoples, lands, animals, women, and children' (Thompsell 205). The story of the nutmeg tree's destruction by Amitav Ghosh in his text The Nutmeg's Curse (2021) vividly illustrates how the portrayal of the globe as a resource 'to be used by those humans who are strong enough to dominate them ' is intimately implicated in planetary ecological catastrophes (Ghosh 82). Mark W. Driscoll's provocative book, The Whites Are Enemies of Heaven: Climate Caucasianism and Asian Ecological Protection, examines the relationship between Asians and Westerners in the nineteenth century via case studies of China and Japan. The book's central theme is the Chinese and Japanese people's intense desire to maintain the "harmonious relationship between the spheres of Heaven and Earth" in the face of what they see to be the disturbance of this balance by Westerners' industrialization (Driscoll 2).

Like his earlier book Benang: From the Heart (1999), Kim Scott's That Deadman Dance is based on local history narratives. In contrast to Benang, That Deadman Dance approaches the problem of Indigenous dispossession in a totally different way. As in his last book, Scott forgoes contestation and resistance in favor of friendship and connection, both of which honor the local and the singular. The narrative illustrates the two divergent perspectives and perceptions of Australia's land and its relationship. The indigenous perspective on land, which views it as a component of the human interweaving of human and non-human relations, contrasts sharply with the colonial perspective, which views it as existing outside of a person. Understanding these disparities in their perceptions of nature is essential to comprehending their relationship to it. Whereas Europeans saw their territories as a place to extract profits, indigenous men are devoted to their homeland. The earliest European settlers' arrival in Albany and their early cohabitation with Australia's indigenous Noongar people are both depicted in the book. In his initial land expedition, Dr. Cross establishes cordial relations with the Indigenous people, the Wunyeran and Menak, constructs structures, and manages a cattle enterprise. Science historian Donna Haraway studied the "cannibalistic western logic that readily constructs other cultural possibilities as resources for western needs and actions" (Haraway 5) in her 1989 book Primate Visions.

In his novels, Scott discusses the indigenous cosmology, which differs from western viewpoints. In contrast to the Western view of the landscape, the indigenous people viewed their land, animals, and nation as an integral part of themselves. In an Indigenous worldview, the concept of "country" does not allow for the partition of people, land, and water. Indigenous historian Steven Kinnane writes "Indigenous people view their nation in terms of interconnectedness between economy, spirituality, knowledge, and kin." (Kinnane 25). First-hand descriptions of non-human life, like that of the whales, are portrayed in Deadman Dance, which also emphasizes the mythological significance of the creatures and avoids portraying it only through a humanist perspective. Scott thus dismantles the notion of human exceptionalism

and describes how historical events are shaped by the interactions between human and non-human beings. This can be figured out from Bobby's first encounter as a baby with the whales "He was not much more than a baby when he first saw whales rolling between him and the islands, a very close island, a big family of whales breathing easily" (Scott 1). Noongar and whale's relationship is depicted as involving family ties in addition to physical proximity. Bobby, who has "so much family out there in the sea... knows there's life under the sea still, like there was at the cold, frozen time... Outside and inside, ocean and blood; almost the same salty fluid," is said to be "brothers" with the whale, along with his gang (Scott, 293–4). Menak, the elder, tells the small child Bobby a whale tale to illustrate the familial tie:

Two steps more and you are sliding, sliding deep into a dark and breathing cave that resonates with whale song. Beside you beats a blood-filled heart so warm it could be fire. Plunge your hands into that whale heart, lean into it and squeeze and let your voice join the whale's roar. Sign that song your father taught you as the whale dives, down, deep. (Scott 2-3).

Scott interprets this story as both a spiritual connection to the ocean and a story of a Noongar man controlling a whale through song and violence. (Brewster 229). Bobby's upbringing was shaped by White culture, and he used whale ships as a means of ocean exploration. He had the mentality of a Noongar and the influence of Western capitalism, making his identity a hybrid. However, a materialist worldview shaped by nationalism, imperialism, and capitalism—where whales are viewed as a resource and commodity to be used for human benefit—confronts the novel's cosmic portrayal of human and non-human connection. In contrast to Menak's story, when Bobby imagines himself sliding down the whale's spout, in the following chapter, Bobby slides around on the deck of a ship that is sailing into shore. Bobby's life and destiny are impacted by the two economies of commercial whaling and brotherhood with the whale. In different economies, he has varied attachments and obligations. For example, family systems give him a spiritual duty to the whale, while business relationships control his role as a crew member on a whaleship. Bobby gradually comes to understand how his actions affect the environment and marine life. He notes that whales have lost their cultural importance and have just been reduced to a commodity for whalers.

Harpooned, dragging a great weight of pain, the mother was returning to her calf. The silver spear of the bow of the boat stabbed again and again … The mother whale's tail repeatedly rose and struck the water close to her dead calf. The men worked the oars to evade her blows, and each blow was less … The man at the bow drove and twisted his steel spear into the whale (Scott 257).

The cruelty with which the whale was hunted caused Bobby to reflect deeply on his actions and to doubt the anthropocentric values of his White companions, who had little regard for non-human life and just supported resource extraction. Scott criticizes colonialism and its damaging effects on the native lands' natural ecology. He criticizes the propensity of Europeans to control nature and all living things for their own financial benefit. As the whale population in the native lands gradually declined, Bobby found himself in a serious existential quandary. "Once he [Bobby] was a whale and men from all points of the ocean horizon lured him close and chased and speared and would not let him rest until… Bobby led them to the ones he loved, and soon he was the only one swimming" (Scott 160). The whale is a symbol of their indigenous identity as well as a means of making money. Mass murders of whales caused their numbers to decline, which may be a symbolic allusion to the settlers' eviction of the native population. Non-human existence is destroyed for material gain, and what is even more shocking is that Indigenous males were drawn in by the settlers' materialistic offerings. It demonstrates how settlers jeopardize their harmonious relationship with the non-human ecosystem. Thus, Scott's novel explores how the colonizers accelerated the climate crisis in Australia by prioritizing capital gains people and visualizing animals and all other non-human living forms through a consumerist lens. Scott presents all beings as interrelated and criticizes the European promotion of human exceptionalism.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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