

An Interpretation of Harley's Identity in *Benang: From the Heart* From the Perspective of Postcolonialism

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Benang: From the Heart is one of the masterpieces of Australian Aboriginal author Kim Scott. This semi-autobiographical work won the Miles Franklin Award, Australia's highest literary award, upon its publication in 1999. In his work, Scott focuses on the fate of contemporary indigenous Australians and emphasizes the relationship between indigenous peoples and white people. *Benang: From the Heart* tells the story of Harley, a young man of mixed Aboriginal and white colonial descent, as he searches for his identity in historical documents, expressing Scott's critique of the "White Australia policy". This paper analyzes Harley's identity crisis and identity construction in *Benang: From the Heart* in the light of postcolonialism and the identity concerns of indigenous people.

Keywords: Kim Scott, *Benang: From the Heart*, postcolonialism, identity

Introduction

Kim Scott is a novelist of Aboriginal Australian heritage, with a white mother and an Aboriginal father. Scott began writing shortly after becoming a secondary school English teacher, and he spent time teaching in an Aboriginal community in Northern Western Australia, where he began researching his family's history. To date, he has written five novels and a children's book, and has published poetry and short stories in a series of anthologies. 2000 saw Australian Aboriginal author Kim Scott win Australia's highest literary award, the Miles Franklin Literary Award, for his full-length novel *Benang: From the Heart*. In 2011, he was awarded the Miles Franklin Literary Award again for his novel *That Deadman Dance*. Kim Scott's lyrical and elegant writing style explores the construction of Aboriginal identity and the search for a place to belong, while showing readers the suffering of the Noongar people under colonial rule in the vast expanse of Western Australia. It has profound historical significance for the reader's understanding of Australian history and culture. *Benang: From the Heart* is a fictionalized family history. Harley, a mixed-race Australian Aborigine, discovers through the notes of his white grandfather Ernest Solomon Scat and his family lineage chart that the so-called "social engineering experiment" promoted by white racists has led to the sacrifice of countless Aboriginal women. Generations of mixed-race children, depending on the shade of their skin, have had different positions in society, but none have been able to escape the tradition of enslavement and even humiliation. By tracing his own life, Harley exposes the conspiracy of the white racists represented by Ernest to carry out the extermination policy against the indigenous people, and reveals the little-known and unimaginable sufferings of

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the indigenous people as a result. The novel unfolds in multiple scenes and plots, and through the narrative of many characters' experiences, it unfolds a picture of the catastrophic history of the Aborigines in Western Australia. *Benang: From the Heart* is the first to reveal the secret of the white settlers' attempt to change the history of the Aborigines and even to wipe out the Aborigines by so-called eugenic methods of changing their bloodlines and backgrounds.

Postcolonialism is a strongly political and culturally critical academic discourse that emerged in Western academia in the 1970s, focusing on the relationship between sovereign states and former colonies. What is distinctive about postcolonialism is that it is not an ironclad, rigid theory, since its inception has often changed to accommodate different historical moments, geographical regions, cultural identities, political situations, subordination, and reading practices. Postcolonial discourse is primarily a theoretical study of cultural differences between the original sovereign, the colony, and the Third World and relies particularly on Foucault's doctrine of the relationship between "discourse" and "power". Postcolonialism denies all master-narratives and considers all master-narratives to be Eurocentric, thus critiquing Eurocentrism is the basic task of postcolonialism. Postcolonialism shifts the critical attention from "national origin" to "subject position". It focuses on the intricate relationship between "self" and "other" in the process of subject formation, so that hybridity is more important to it than difference.

This paper analyzes Harley's cultural identity in *Benang: From the Heart* in the context of postcolonialism and indigenous concerns about identity.

Identity Crisis of Harley

The Engineering of Whiteness

Harley's skin, the narrator in the novel *Benang: From the Heart*, is the result of "breeding out the color". He wanted to know if he was really the "first successful white man" in the family. Who among his ancestors would be proud of him and ashamed of him? *Benang: From the Heart* is a haunting sad story, which describes in detail the influence of a vicious white parent Ernest Solomon Scat on the Noongars, and he tried to control by supporting inter-ethnic reproduction. Paul Newman in the article "Disgrace, Benang, and the Search for Benevolence", argues that "the focus of Scott's text is not Ern Scat, but the products of his deliberate miscegenation: Harley, and others who are seeking to both re-discover their own identities and to ascertain their relationship to whiteness" (2005, p. 3).

In the early 20th century, Ernest Scat immigrated to the town of Gableup on the west coast of Australia. The background of the story is set in this place. Although Ernest lived with colored people among the aborigines, his sense of white superiority and the "white skin complex" brought from his hometown Scotland have always been with him. Ernest's behavior towards the aborigines shows the contradictory duality of the white policy: On the surface, he tries to help the local aborigines, but after in-depth investigation, we can see that his behavior only serves the purpose of the white people. Inspired by A. O. Neville's work and words, he plans to use "scientific" methods to achieve his goal—to create a "consistent with his own image" new species. However, his so-called scientific project was carried out by impregnating a series of Aboriginal women. And the new species he will produce will be better and more perfect than anything else, so far. After many efforts, Ernest realized his ultimate wish—to cultivate a "new species" in mankind. His grandson Harley was the "first successful white man" in the family. The creator image of Ernest is emphasized by the narrator Harley. The whole process attracted grandpa's feeling of being a scientist. Whatever the confusions of my genealogy, there

seems little doubt that my grandfather intended to be my creator. It was he that, if not indeed forming the idea, applied it as Mr. Neville was unable to do (Scott, 1999, p. 32). In the first half of the 20th century, Australia took eugenics as a so-called solution to "indigenous problems". Ern showed an abnormal interest in the idea that whites could change the genetic composition of the whole race. And he was so obsessed with his experiments that he completely abandoned morality and ethics. From his actions, as a god like figure, he tried to create a white man from himself. Scott stressed that in Harley's "creation", the only ability of Noongar women is to serve them as a body machine, as an incubator and storage room for fetuses. He thought of a reversal, of small white streams entering black. He saw fractions sliding up one another, the lower numbers going larger as a single digit skipped from one to the other, always on top (Scott, 1999, p. 76). Thus Haig (2009) regarded the application of eugenics as "pseudoscience and an Australian colony". Harley was a test subject for eugenics experiments, and Ernest was watching him all the time, or rather, monitoring him. After the terrible car accident, Harley's skin took on a blue hue. During Harley's illness and listlessness, Ern investigated him most closely, and Ern may have wondered if this blue color had returned to his ancestors. Ern also paid close attention to the white appearance of his wives. His adopted daughter Topsy became his second wife after Kathleen because of her fair skin.

Using the evolutionary ideas of social Darwinism, Ern became an avid follower of genetic modification experiments on mixed-race Aborigines, and Harley became a "work in progress" in his grandfather's white experiments. Scott denounces how the white man's assimilation policy ended in disaster for the indigenous people. In addition, Topsy's death underscores the identity crisis that Aboriginal people are caught in between their true Aboriginal identity and the white ideal.

The Quest for Aboriginality

Halley's identity crisis is caused by his middle position. This confusion makes him produce some physical symptoms. As the first successful white man in the family, Harley woke up with a terrible pressure. Harley hated to be a "white man". He tried to reverse his grandfather's process. He was taught to inherit one heritage and ignore another. "I found that I wanted to change this way of upbringing, not only for my own children, but also for my ancestors and their children. Therefore, inevitably, especially for myself" (Scott, 1999, p. 19).

Led by his native uncles Will and Jack, he made a "walkabout" trip. This is a journey of reconciliation with tribal culture and country across time and space. He wanted to strive for his Aboriginal identity. Will and Jack took Harley to visit some of his big Aboriginal families. At the same time, they also told Harley about their own tragic experiences and the past of their Noongars. This journey is full of painful memories and traumatic experiences of the past, which leads Halley to the depths of his past. As a way of counterattack, Harley used violence against the old and weak Ern to express his frustration and anger. "I poured black ink and ash into the wounds, and tended them carefully so that the skin would heal and seal the letters stark and proud" (Scott, 1999, p. 445). "Soon I turned to my grandfather's flesh. I wanted to mark him, to show my resentment at how his words had shaped me" (Scott, 1999, p. 37). "I bathed him in salty water, was slow and gentle with my touch. The wounds I'd given him grew, and in unforeseen ways" (Scott, 1999, p. 78). These torments reflect how Ern treated the aborigines in his life, and the salt water bath is a reminder of the bleach bath he gave Topsy. Harley bathed him in salt water, moving slowly and gently gave him more and more wounds, and in an unpredictable way. Harley's torture of Erne was not only physical, but also psychological: Harley almost completely destroyed Erne's house, because it was a white colonial symbol. The demolition of the house,

coupled with Haley's resistance, cut off his connection with Ern. All these show that Harley is trying to erase the existence of white people from this land.

After seeing Ern's files, photos, and works, Harley found that in the eyes of eugenics, whites have a moral right to create a new nation from a despised race. From initial shock and disbelief, Halley firmly believed that his grandfather intended to be his creator, and he was the end result of Ern. He is the end result of Ern's fantasy: a fiction. Therefore, Harley also destroyed his grandfather's works. His grandfather's work burned it piece by piece, torturing him.

One at a time, bit by bit, I wrote out Grandad's so carefully collected and meticulously filed documents. One at a time, I held each before his eyes, put a match to it, and let it fall when the flame reached my fingers. (Scott, 1999, p. 349)

Despite his efforts to understand the past of himself and his people, Harley did not know who he was. Harley is still essentially what his grandfather taught him and made him what he was. In the process of discovering his true identity, he encountered many obstacles, it was difficult to overcome the existence of whites, and Harley's Aboriginal heritage could not be fully restored. Therefore, his efforts to find himself in the long forgotten dark chapter of Australian history. For Harley, the history of colonial rule is just an illusion. Under white rule, Harley and his family had no tomorrow, no future.

Harley's Identity Construction

In the process of Harley's growth, the influence of his white grandfather and his aboriginal relatives is like two rivers coming from different directions. The process of constructing his identity is not a clear-cut dichotomy, but is full of contradictions and hybridity. Although his return to the Noongar family means that he refuses to accept the identity of the "first white man" in his family set by his white grandfather, in his spiritual world, the constant clash between the aboriginal and white cultures makes Harley as the subject in the process of aboriginal identity construction present contradictions, compromises, and oscillations. Harley hates his grandfather's genetic experimentation and cannot contain his anger due to his grandfather's brutal manipulation and control, and Harley is also determined to stop his grandfather's white colonialization and fears that he will become a "successful experiment" to sabotage his grandfather's experiment. However, Harley does not abandon his grandfather, who is old and faint and has difficulty in moving due to a stroke. He had to take care of an old man at the same time, and he had to spend time cleaning up the house. And, during his walkout, the racist ideas that Ern passes on to Harley continue to disturb him, making him suspicious of his aboriginal uncle: "In fact, I felt disturbed. I didn't know who to trust". He was able to use his reading and writing skills to compete with his grandfather, to give white English an Aboriginal historical connotation, to retell white white-washed history with the logic, structure, vocabulary, and grammar unique to Aboriginal English; to expose the evils of white people's attempts to change Aboriginal history by changing bloodlines and backgrounds, to break the shackles of the genealogical chart designed by white people, and to save his own aboriginal culture. Harley, who has recovered his life's origin, is finally accepted by the Noongar tribe's relatives, gaining a real aboriginal identity and continuous spiritual strength, so that he can retell the story of the aborigines and the whites from the perspective of the family's wise man, and so that the aborigines as a nation can be truly perpetuated. At the same time, in the mixed space of black and white, Harley, who has a mixed identity, also tries to dissolve the ethical conflict, and tries to deconstruct the ethical knot that haunts him by means of communication and narrative, so that Harley not only integrates into the embrace of his aboriginal

relatives, but also gives space for reflection to the white colonizers represented by his grandfather, thus enabling the aboriginal group and the white group to screen their thoughts and settle their emotions in the ambivalent and mixed space of common belonging. The space for reflection is also given to the white colonists represented by his grandfather.

Conclusion

This paper explores Harley's identity crisis and construction from a postcolonial perspective. As the product of a genetic modification experiment that could be carried out by his white grandfather, Harley in *Benang: From the Heart* is confronted with the question of "who am I" when he discovers the truth and is caught in a crisis of identity. He is both a test subject of his grandfather's "eugenics" policy and a man who is eager to find his indigenous ancestry and family roots. He slowly begins to construct his own identity, a process full of contradictions and hybridity, not a black-and-white dichotomy. *Benang: From the Heart* points out a way of survival for the mixed-race aborigines like Harley: First, there must be an inner initiative to seek one's own origin with the aboriginal ancestors, and in the twists and turns of transcendence, it is possible to dissolve the problem of black-white cultural clash, to obtain spiritual belonging and to re-cognize and re-identify with the whole self. The essay also shows that the author, Kim Scott, through his literary creation, seeks the identity of the indigenous people and gives a profound criticism to the white people who try to eliminate the indigenous people.

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