

Converging Histories: Kim Scott and Hazel Brown's *Kayang and Me*

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Abstract: The notion of Aboriginality or Indigeneity is complex and polysemous. Self-identification has varied connotations for the Indigenous people of Australia, yet the Indigenous communities with shared experiences of dispossession, dislocation and alienation in their own land have a unified sense of identity as well. Acknowledging their link with the land, the Aboriginals consider connection with the land as central to their being of Aboriginality. Like most other Indigenous population in the world Aboriginal people of Australia too have been denied a history, rather have been thought to be without history. Their stories have been dismissed just as myths or folklore. Their oral literature has been inconsequential in front of history proper as demanded by the White Australians. Without the 'appropriate' means to transmit their history to the mainstream, Aboriginal voices have largely been excluded from historical constructions. The present paper aims to discuss Aboriginal writer Kim Scott and Hazel Brown's book *Kayang and Me* (2005) as a narrative which depicts the history of Wilomin Noongar community through the history of writer's own family. Kim Scott and his aunt Hazel Brown have constructed a story which reveals the deep connection of land, culture and identity among the Aboriginal people. With the juxtaposition of two voices the novel unravels the common stories in terms of colonization, oppression and racism which are unique in specific culture and social structure. The paper is divided into two parts. Part one depicts the distinct culture of Noongar community where family, belongingness and nature predominate. In part two the history of colonization becomes significant. As such cultural history and history of oppression converge to rearticulate, the position of Noongar community in particular and the Aboriginal people in general, in contemporary Australia.

Keywords: Aboriginality, history, racism, belonging

... a story can be more true than the truth, and ... story can get to the very essence, the spirit of something. Especially when it's something like 'injustice' and the abuse of power (Scott 150).

The notion of Aboriginality or Indigeneity is complex and polysemous. Self-identification has varied connotations for the Indigenous people of Australia, yet the Indigenous communities with shared experiences of dispossession, dislocation and alienation in their own land have a unified sense of identity as well. Acknowledging their link with the land, the Aboriginals consider connection with the land as central to their being of Aboriginality. In addition to descent, identity and acceptance as per anthropological definition of Aboriginality; race, culture, history and land are also integral components of Aboriginal identity. Like most other

Indigenous population in the world Aboriginal people of Australia too have been denied a history, rather have been thought to be without history. Their stories have been dismissed just as myths or folklore. Their oral literature has been inconsequential in front of history proper as demanded by the White Australians. Without the 'appropriate' means to transmit their history to the mainstream, Aboriginal voices have largely been excluded from historical constructions. Like the literature of other former colonies, the Indigenous literature of Australia too blitz their 'own' history. The authors are reviving history not only to connect with the past but also to interrogate and confront the (mis)representation of their culture, people and history. In fact, they are 'writing back to the centre'. The major aim of these Aboriginal writers remains to check and expunge the constricted reading and version, and corruption of their history. The need has been felt because of the pertinent question: 'who writes?' and 'for whom?' Hence, varied historical perspectives need to make a strong presence in the 'black' history written by the White Australians. What was considered as a civilizing process by the Whites has been judged as cultural genocide by the Aboriginals. This erroneous misinformation is being corrected by the Aboriginal writers now. The present paper aims to discuss Kim Scott and Hazel Brown's book *Kayang and Me* (2005) as a narrative which depicts the history of Wilomin Noongar community through the history of writer's own family. Kim Scott and his aunt Hazel Brown have constructed a story which reveals the deep connection of land, culture and identity among the Aboriginal people. With the juxtaposition of two voices the novel unravels the common stories in terms of colonization, oppression and racism which are unique in specific culture and social structure. The paper is divided into two parts. Part one depicts the distinct culture of Noongar community where family, belongingness and nature predominate. In part two the history of colonization becomes significant. As such cultural history and history of oppression converge to rearticulate, the position of Noongar community in particular and the Aboriginal people in general, in contemporary Australia.

I

Culture of any community implies distinctive techniques of a group and its characteristics. As in literature, it signifies written expression of these aspects because "... the concept of culture is understood as combining a specifically 'literary' sense of culture as 'art' with an 'anthropological' sense of culture as a 'way of life'" (Milner and Browitt 21). Hazel Brown, the main voice in the novel, traces the family tree way back to her grand father's mother who belonged to Wilomin people. Kim Scott reveres the way she narrates the story of her own people, his own people. She regards her early years being more informative since she was also learning the ways of the Whites. She has fond memories of childhood "And strongest of all are her memories of when they were a family unit, and away from the towns" (Scott.121). The Wilomin people travelled a lot and young

children imbibed the culture of being one with nature. All the elders taught the children to snare, track, hunt and gather food. For the Indigenous people, belonging emerges from identification with "...animals, plants, humans and physiographic features of the country associated with them" (Robinson 31). Noongars from Western Australia too bond with the animal and plant world. They even feed porpoise, Salmon and dolphin. One of the Noongars identifies so much with the whale that he enters it and is respected by his clan for the urge to be a part of animal world. Hazel Brown acquaints us with the mythology of Noongar community when she explains how with the help of *mayan Wangin* (whirlwind), the boy eaten up by *Djaank Yok Koomba* (Devil Woman), comes back to life. For Noongars this indigeneity is the core of their existence. Further, Brown gives "a very regional perspective" by giving the glimpse of bird called Nyoorrem. The description tells about mystic dimension of the culture "this is a big bird, a big owl" (Scott 238) "About three feet high, long legs and big feet. Sorta short wings and the face! Boy, his face was just like a man. That's a Nyoorrem. He's half man" (Scott 239). It is suggested that the place belonging to it cannot be invaded. Even Indigenous people cannot hunt in its country. So powerful is the faith in myths that to escape water shortage and drought a *kalari* (yellow-tongued lizard) is killed. And rain is surely to follow – atypical Aboriginal faith.

By describing various relations of grandfather, grandmother, uncles, aunts and cousins, the book gives an insight into the Indigenous culture where human bonding sustains life and extended families are a boon, a need and a necessity. In 1939, Hazel Brown at the age of fourteen goes to Carrolup to work with Mrs. Wilhelm, a white, who treats her as an equal. However, she has to leave because of mother's illness. When Hazel comes back she joins Richardsons. Her attachment to the family makes her go back every weekend. A little later, individualistic Mrs. Richardson tries to teach her, "Oh, you don't want to go back every week. You want to try and forget those people. You want to try and make something of your life." (Scott 135) to which Hazel replies, "...if I can only make something of my life by staying away from my people, I don't want it. I don't want a life without my family. Without my mother, or my black father, or my black relations, because life wouldn't have any meaning at all for me" (Scott 135). Kim Scott appreciates Kayang Hazel's readiness to belong. As a strong Indigenous woman she is willing to own her people and confront life. Her suburban house with adult grandchildren (both schizophrenics) and great grandchildren make place for a happy family. Even at the age of seventy-five she brings back a grand-daughter, Lindley, from New South Wales (after Lindley leaves her violent partner). Hazel Brown demonstrates the courage of an Indigenous person and the culture of the community which feels responsible towards each other. Even the dead people are an integral part of the Noongar community. And only those people can visit them who are accepted in the family. Hazel Brown

illustrates how her mother (a white) and father visit the massacre site at Cocanarup. It demonstrates her mother's acceptance into the family as "...you're not allowed to go places unless you're accepted into the family, tribal way" (Scott 66).

Kim Scott does not have a bush upbringing and there has not been an earnest transmission of cultural values. As a family he has had a time of togetherness and joy living, around Ravensthorpe and Hopetwon, yet he knows little about his own people. However, his urge to belong finds expression in 'looking thru the archives'. This he experiences with Kayang Hazel. With her, he comes a step further than being just the political representative of Noongar people. Being part of countless stories narrated by Kayang Hazel makes him a part of "... collective identities, our shared heritage" (Scott 257). Kim Scott experiences atypical and unique connection to land - land which gives Aboriginal culture its basis of existence and from which emerges Indigenous songs and dance. Depiction of history too emerges out of Aboriginal people's strong identification and affinity with the land. Land remains the centre of their belongingness. By dealing with the issue of 'terra firma' Scott establishes the connection even in contemporary times. In fact he reinforces this distinctive bond and relationship with earth. Kim Scott, coordinator of Aboriginal bridging course at a local university, takes his students to the interiors. The students are hesitant to go as only 'oppressive culture' is left - not "... high' culture, not creation stories, language and songs" (Scott 17). However, on reaching the terrain and in the company of Noongar elder Ralph Winmar they experience "...the songs and language of its ancestral spirits" (Scott 17) and land. Kim Scott too feels rejuvenated which strengthens his need to revive the relationship between the Noongars and the land - "It seemed true, an old spirit rests in the land and we, its people are the catalyst of its awakening. It's a potential, a possibility that still excites me" (Scott 18). Even when he visits an Indigenous site with Hazel Brown he strongly identifies with the land. He understands how his writings could preserve and present his customs, traditions and civilization. He says, "...I stood on the sandy shore of my indigenous heritage, and sensed something substantial and sustaining waiting for me to grasp, and yet the only means I had to do was this laying out of words upon a page" (Scott 29).

Any culture is the product and "... exchange of meanings, how we make sense of the word, particularly through language" (Teo, Hsu-Ming and Richard White 3). Words in Noongar culture have a distinct identity and reverence, especially the words of the elders. Kim Scott has written this book *Kayang & Me* from the transcriptions of the tape-recordings (with Hazel Brown). It has been a challenge for him "...to capture the distinctive nature of her speech while allowing it to be relatively smooth to read on the page" (Scott 11). As such Noongar words are used to the minimum because they are best transmitted orally. Yet they figure since they position a culture in the text and the reader is able to connect with

the community. The meaning of language keeps on changing. Twenty years ago in the transcripts of Hazel Brown interviews, expressions like 'people of colour' and 'colored people' are used more than Noongar or Aboriginal. There is also a distinction between 'half-castes' and 'full-bloods'. At present, this distinction has been obliterated; instead Aboriginal, Indigenous and individual names of the tribes are vocalized. Now, Kim Scott strongly propagates "... consolidation of 'cultural capital' within community, and how to ensure its transmission and regeneration" (Scott 69).

II

The Aboriginal Identity has emerged out of the history which voices a racist past. The history of the community as shared by Hazel Brown also mirrors the oppressive policies faced by the original inhabitants of Australia. Being a researcher Kim Scott cross-examines the oral history narrated by Hazel Brown against available written records. However, with the passage of time he starts to trust the words of an elder. Racial prejudice has been a painful chapter of Australia. Kim Scott says, "... if there's a lot to do with racism and oppression in these pages, its because its so crucial to many of our Noongar people's sense of identity, history and justice" (Scott 119). Kim Scott documents how crime against the Aboriginals was not even reported. In 1880 at Cocanarup there was a massacre which was not acknowledged but Aboriginals recall it with anguish. Further, Hazel Brown remembers how around 1914 her acquaintances - Clem and Anna Miller, Lily and Fred Wynne, Fred Roberts - were taken away from Ongerup to be put in Carrulop Native settlement on the pretext of their betterment. However, the treatment meted out to them bordered on inhumanity. Young girls were violated. Even to the ill, no medical aid was available. When Noongars raised the voice against injustice, they were beaten up. Further, Hazel Brown remembers how in 1940s the Indigenous people were not allowed to enter Gnowangerup town after 6 p.m. Another incidence, recalled is when John Dunn, a white, was killed by Noongar man for molesting a thirteen year old girl. This invited a brutal retaliation from the whites who ordered the killing of seventeen people living in the vicinity. Even this massacre went unreported.

What the children see around is imitated by them. That is what the White children learn from the racist attitude of their parents. Even the educational institutions, thought to be impartial in character, have apartheid taking place within. Young Indigenous children are harassed for the colour of their skin. Ten years old Eric is upset, "They're always talking about colour, I hate the way they're always talking about colour, I hate that school" (Scott 156). Young impressionable vulnerable minds get tarnished forever. Such harsh experiences sometimes make them even drop out of the schools. This racially prejudiced attitude of the White children gets extended to their adolescent years as well. A White teenager says, "You know, you coloured people have to bow down to us... we're

your superiors. You have to listen to what I say” (Scott 143), Hazel Brown strongly resists this discriminatory remark and replies “Listen now, women won their rights a long time ago. One day, the black people are going to win their freedom too. I call no man master” (Scott 144). However, there are not many Indigenous people who are able to retort. Most of them usually take the verbal onslaught without much resistance. Even the Native welfare people did not do anything to improve the condition. Because of the discriminatory tendencies, welfare people never acquainted the Aboriginals with their rights. Most of the time Aboriginal workers were paid less wages. Since they were ignorant about workers' union they never joined it, and welfare did not bother to inform them. Hazel Brown narrates how while coming back from the hospital to Gnowangerup the Noongars could not take the road through the town, just because they were the Aboriginals. If they were caught, they were beaten up by the police. Racial prejudice makes the White people loose touch with their own humanity.

The hypocritical nature of the Whites/ settlers is the byproduct of their racist attitude and position. On the one hand, they refuse to acknowledge the presence of the original inhabitants in the White dominated society. And on the other hand; they want the Indigenous to fight for the country. Hazel Brown remembers how it had become compulsory for the Aboriginal boys to join the army so that they could be sent to Vietnam. However, Hazel Brown refutes assertively, “What one owns in Western Australia is not worth laying down our lives for. Most of us only got the reserve, and even then we haven't got the little deeds for it. We don't bloody well own it so why go and fight for them?” (Scott 153). The self-centeredness of the settlers found an answer in Hazel Brown's defiance. She was very certain of white apathy and indifference as when Noongar men came back they were alcoholic wrecks. And in the restaurants they were not even served. The Whites thought them to be fit enough to be in military but not human enough to be served. Furthermore even in death they did not get their due military honour. Hazel Brown states, “When they died they never even had a military funeral They never got help from the Repatriation Department; ... No land settlement scheme for them.... Not a thing. They didn't recognise them” (Scott 154).

Medicine is considered to be a life saving profession. Even here the Whites are unable to sustain their humanity. Hazel Brown narrates the callous approach of the Gnowangerup doctors. In the 1920s the Indigenous people of Gnowangerup were not allowed to even enter the hospital, as such many Indigenous people succumbed to diphtheria outbreak. The Whites did not bother to make arrangements for the fellow beings. Even in the 1930s when flu epidemic hit most of the Indigenous people died. Even in a decade's time the humaneness of the Whites was not awakened. “Still the same ; not one was allowed into the Gnowangerup Hospital” (Scott 163). The racial history shows how later when hospital was opened

"The big building in front was for white people, and there wards about twenty or thirty yards back were for the Aboriginals..."(Scott 163). The need to establish themselves as superior made the Whites forget the human touch. Further, the Aboriginal people had to wait till the very last to show themselves "Always it was white before black in the early fifties"(Scott 164). Hazel Brown narrates the personal experience where apartheid amounted to murder, when she (eight months pregnant) and her husband go to Dr. Parton to get their little baby girl Valda Glennis examined. Since he is busy playing golf, he does not attend to the child, who eventually yields to the injury. Hazel Brown does not take this lightly. She takes Dr. Parton to court in Narrogin and he gets banned from practicing medicine. However, in the court the White settlers basically blame the Aboriginals for not taking enough care of the children, hence, trying to project the carelessness of the Aboriginal parents towards their children. Though Dr. Parton is replaced by another White doctor Dr. McCormick (who is more helpful) yet he too exhibits traits of discrimination. Indigenous people are examined either on the verandah or in the waiting room, never inside the doctor's room.

Colonial oppression, besides adopting racism as a segregating policy, also divides the Aboriginals along the skin colour. This has been there for a long time. Kayang Hazel's remark about her ancestor, Bobby Roberts, defines this, "I hate the white man who put the gun in my grandfather's hands, so they could get control over Noongars, and gave him the chains, so he could chain them up and white people are still doing that today, like with ATSIC and their black bureaucracy" (Scott 191-192). The fair-skinned Noongars got well furnished homes from the Government to stay whereas others were sent off to distant places. "Racism was like law, it was official" (Scott 174). The Whites always believed in "colour bar" (Scott 173). Colour bar made Black Noongars go against *wadjela* Noongars (white Noongars) as most of the Black Noongars are on the street and *wadjela* Noongars have the jobs to sustain themselves. Hazel Brown also narrates how even in marriage the Whites wished to control the Aboriginal spouse. John Mason married Fanny Winnery in 1884. It can be seen as "... claiming his wife and children through 'White' law may have been a way of consciously separating them from their surviving extended Noongar family, and thus been an element of the very apparatus of conquest" (Scott 81).

The indigenous people have to bear the brunt of non-belongingness because of the settlers' non-cooperative stance. Kein grows up in town and sees the plight "Individuals were fined for being on the reserve, and fined for being in town. Their crime was being non-Aboriginal in the one place and Aboriginal in the other,"(Scott 14). This treatment meted out to them leads them towards "Identity confusion". Even the definition of Native Title does not help in defining Aboriginal identity. Though Kim Scott's mother was accepted by the Noongars because of her knowledge of community, of genealogy, of sites, history and language, the Whites did not accept her. Kim Scott rightly points out, "Write down the areas of society where Kayang Hazel has seen race make a difference; it's like

listing government departments: Employment, Sport and Recreation, Education, Health, Water... take it as evidence of institutionalized racism" (Scott 177).

However, Kim Scott also points out that the apartheid has not got internalized. In spite of the racist prejudice prevalent even now, inspired from Hazel Brown, Kim Scott too believes in the humanity of the Whites and tends to see Australia as a State impartial to its subjects. He says "Kayang Hazel is not ignorant of the historical context of stolen land and racial injustice yet,.. she's also able to see people as individuals rather than only as members of racial or political groups" (Scott 227). Also "...Sixty five percent of Australia's Indigenous people marry non-indigenous people..." (Scott 178). Still many Noongars prefer to marry blacks because it gives them a sense of solidarity. Scott himself is married to a non-indigenous Irish-German immigrant. His two sons remain under stress as it is inevitable for people living in a divided society – Noongar and *Wadjela*. They are on the edge of double abuse – on one side being taunted as 'boongs' and 'niggers', and on other as 'white cunts'. Hazel Brown is a *wadjela* Noongar and so is Kim Scott, yet they are proud of their Aboriginality thus submitting "... heritage, solidarity, and at the same time - given her appearance –subverting notions of exclusively race-based identity" (Scott 177). Thus, in *Kayango and Me* the culture of Noongar community gives the glimpse of rich cultural heritage of other Indigenous communities as well. It reshapes the insides of the Aboriginal people and voices their concerns. The brutal denial of history, culture, traditions and spiritual associations by the Whites have led to the loss of his Aboriginal identity which Kim Scott reclaims through Hazel Brown's recounting of history. He takes a step closer to the realization of his Aboriginal identity as well, as he learns the Noongar language and develops a better understanding accompanied with great admiration and appreciation towards Aboriginal history and culture. Through oral history of Noongar people of Western Australia the history of colonial and racial oppression, too, he depicts so as to re-position, re-establish and re-present the Aboriginal people in contemporary Australia.

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