

Settler Imperialism: loss of Environmental and Social Ecology in Kim Scott's *THAT DEADMAN DANCE*

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Abstract - Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* explores the Indigenous Noongar landscape, natives, culture and the colonial settlement that happens between 1826 to 1844. Kim Scott points out the dependence of Aboriginals in nature and the ecological imbalance done by the settlers. The imperial society dominates the Indigenous community and their natural environments. The Europeans who arrive on the Aboriginal land plans to settle on the Aboriginal land. Soon as they arrive, they forcefully seize the land rights and practices of the Noongar Aboriginals. The settlers take control over the social, cultural, and economic practices of the Indigenous population. By imposing violent practices, they exploit the Aboriginal ecology. The new inhabitant settlers utilize the Noongar land to improve their profits. As a result, agricultural development, and whale hunting negatively affect the Noongar environment. Their disruption creates an imbalance in the Noongar ecosystem. From the literary perspective, the study focuses to view in Ecocritical framework. The researcher presents various disruptions that occur in the Noongar ecology. The study also aims to analyse the social practices and environmental pressures carried throughout the settlement by the settlers.

Index Terms - *That Deadman Dance*, Noongar Aboriginals, Ecocriticism, natural Environment, colonial imperialism.

Novel Outline -*That Deadman Dance* is set in the early decades of the 19th century. The novel talks about the settlement history of the white settlers in the Aboriginal Noongar land. Dr Cross is an English Physician who first arrives on the Noongar land. Observing the richness of the Noongar landscape. Dr Cross plans to bring his people to establish a settlement colony on the Indigenous grounds. He also befriends Wunyeran, the Tribal leader in order to know more about the Aboriginal community and its heritage. Day after day the settlement colony expands with new visitors. The settlers start to use the Noongar

land as commercial property and intend to generate profits. The whites compete with Noongar Aboriginals in accomplishing the highest economic status. The developments done by the whites do not benefit the Noongar people but gradually destroys the Noongar ecology. The imperial attitude of the settlers drives the Aboriginals towards extinction. As a consequence, Noongar ecology collapses with the extinction of animals and humans.

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal people concern a lot about ecology because Aboriginal culture is thoroughly based on nature-centric ideas. The Aboriginal people have their practice belief systems based on the natural world. They believe that it is their responsibility to take care of their land. They feel that if they care about mother earth, their land will help them sustain in all aspects of life in terms of physical, cultural, spiritual, and social. As an Aborigine S. Knight expresses his emotion for his land in the article "Aboriginal Indigenous Spirituality and Beliefs", "We don't own the land, the land owns us. The land is my mother, my mother is the land. Land is the starting point to where it all began. It's like picking up a piece of dirt and saying this is where I started and this is where I'll go. The land is our food, our culture, our spirit and identity".

EUROPEAN IMPERIALISM

The settlers are driven by a profit-seeking attitude. Along with the Indigenous people, they try to imperialise the Aboriginal land. As soon as the settlers arrive, they plan to gather wealth using the richness of the land. A sudden intervention with biological and ecological practices destroys the balance of the ecosystem. The Europeans try to hunt down the fauna

in the Aboriginal land, perform agriculture, cut down the trees, bring infectious disease. Amidst destructions, the settlers prioritise enforcing their power and regime. It is true what John McLeod asserts in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism*, “[c]olonialism is one historically specific mechanism of imperialism which prioritises the act of settlement” (McLeod 18). The white settlers forcefully capture the Aboriginal land as a military garrison and then for agricultural development and later as a shore-based whaling centre. The slow process of settlement brings tremendous changes in the Aboriginal land. The land experiences transformation socially, politically, and culturally. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin together in their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* states that “in the colonies of occupation, these radical inequalities or exchanges seemed most evident – or at least initially – in the military and political arenas, while in the settler colonies it was the results of environmental imperialism that were often most immediately clear” (Huggan and Tiffin 7).

The destructive changes in the Noongar environment occur just after the colonial expansion. As the settlement colony expands, the imperial society introduces new practices to the Indigenous community. The new changes and practices reflect negatively on the biological system. Foster and Brett argue that Ecological imperialism is “robbing the periphery of its natural wealth and exploiting ecological resources” (Foster and Brett 189). The Noongar Aboriginals are unaware of owning the land or fencing the land. Since the Aboriginal environment is open with its resources, the imperial society tries to capture and possess the natural environment for economic power. Thus, it is exploited for the sake of profits. Serpil Opperman in his article titled “Ecological Imperialism in British Colonial Fiction” states as “[t]he colonial practices of farming, plantation of crops, livestock raising, hunting, clearance of trees, and the introduction of non-native species to the regions of the native biota” (Opperman 182).

The white settlers take control of the social practices of Aboriginals. The central character in the novel *Wabalanginy* is named by the Britishers as ‘Bobby’. Since his family name, ‘Wabalanginy’ is hard to pronounce by the Britishers and so he is acknowledged by his first name ‘Bobby’. This act by the settlers is an indirect way of controlling the Aboriginals by

claiming the land to be theirs. As Adams in his “Nature and the Colonial Mind” argues that “[c]olonialism promoted the naming and classification of both people and places, as well as nature, in each case with the aim of control” (Adams 24). The situation of the Noongar is to agree with what the whites command them to do. In the initial stage of settlement, the Aboriginals fear rebelling against the settlers.

The environmental expansion by the whites indicates transmission of disease among the Aboriginal community. Their arrival brings infections and sickness. This biological expansion creates ecological imbalances among the Aboriginals. This is in accordance with what Opperman claims, “the biological expansion significantly disturbed the ecological balance in practically every bioregion the British invaded” (Opperman 182). Among the white settlers, Dr Cross continuously coughs and blood bleeds from his mouth. His symptoms of the disease involve wheezing and coughing.

The biological expansion of the whites contaminates the native environment and so they die of the disease. The Aboriginal's bodies are not as immune to infectious diseases as the whites. Hence, there is more death rate among the Aboriginal community. Bobby loses his parents soon after his birth. His parents struggle “to breathe properly” (*That Deadman Dance* 129). His parents die of tuberculosis along with smallpox and influenza. He recalls, “his own mother and father forgetting how to breathe properly so they could only exhale and cough, always bent over, stopped, moving like their feet hurt from touching their very own earth. They lay down quietly until the flies came around them and went into their eyes and mouth and nostrils” (*That Deadman Dance* 129). When Bobby becomes ill, he stays inside the hut without moving around.

Such a closed-in life made Bobby ill, and for a long time he saw the trees and sky only through the frame of a window or doorway. He could not breathe properly, and the wind moaned with a voice that might almost have been his ailing own, circling his head. ... Waking in the night, the darkness all around him was unformed spirits pressing for his attention and reaching, ready to snatch him away. (28)

Aborigine Menak identifies the death of his native men. He claims that “he knew most of them, and they were almost as bad off as his own family with so many dying from the coughing and scratching” (156). He

mutters, “Why they gotta come here making trouble?” (156). Wunyeran the good friend of Dr Cross dies of the disease. Slowly the “coughing [takes] very many away” (176). By this, gradually the once high Aboriginal population declines just as the white population increases. Even the settler population notices the decline of the Aboriginal population. They very well figure that there is a natural imbalance among the Aboriginal community. Mrs Chaine realises that “our [settlers] arrival means their [Aboriginal] death” (170). When she has a conversation with Bobby. She whispers at Bobby “You have lost many of your family, Bobby, she said ... Yeah, Bobby said” (170).

The white settlers in order to support the colonial mission, carry disease along with them so that they can captivate the left-over Aboriginals. As Carolyn Merchant in her *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* points, the “European explorers and colonisers brought with them an ecological complex of diseases that devastated native peoples” (Merchant 32).

Once the settlers seize a large part of Aboriginal land, they start to cultivate crops. For example, as Dr Cross observes the Noongar landscape and its soil. He becomes ambitious. He develops an interest to perform agriculture in the Noongar land. He tries to capture a huge part of Aboriginal land for farming. He proudly claims the Aboriginal land as his own land “I’ve taken this land, ... My land” (56). When he communicates with his people in England through letters. He writes about the requirements that the colony wants,

the colony needs people, wrote Cross in a sudden rush, who are willing to explore the surrounding country and able to rise above torpor and timidity so that they might . . . aid and assist each other, create a mutual demand and supply, and extend themselves into the interior, or with capital to beat the enormous expenses of first improvement. Security against want, and extravagant prices of the necessaries of life, would do much to attract the labourer, who is of paramount importance. (37)

The settlers carry equipments to till the grounds to conduct farming. All these new practices and developments all at once disturb the natural environment. The settlers with keen observation conquer the minds of Aboriginal people. They consider the Aboriginals as weak. That is why they use

the Aboriginal environment to make economic profits. William M Adams claims that “colonial nature was made productive, but only through drastic restructuring. New species, new systems of production, new forms of social relations were all the out-workings of the colonial mind. Nature was conquered, made productive despite itself. People were dealt with in the same way” (Adams 43).

Dr Cross believes that “agricultural development [is] both inevitable and necessary” (36). He strongly believes that agriculture will help them to sustain their settlement on the Aboriginal land. By promoting agriculture, the whites take power over the Aboriginal's ration. They try to dominate and change the natural environment of the Aboriginals. Besides their supremacy, the settlers depend on Aboriginals for their survival because they are unfamiliar with Aboriginal land, its weather, the environment, and its living conditions. That is why in the course of abduction, the settlers plan to build a strategic relationship with the Aboriginals. Dr Cross “had friends among the natives” (64). He also believes that “there must be give and take” (64) policy with the Aboriginals. This imperial attitude of Dr Cross presents his goal of preparing the Aboriginal land as an economic property to his people.

With an Eurocentric attitude, Cross encourages his people to take hold of the Aboriginal land. He directs the visitors to own the Aboriginal ground: “Dr Cross’s words passed among the crowd: there is land available at King George Town. Good land at King George Town” (27). Similar to Dr Cross, the new settler Geordie Chaine upon his arrival aims to set up his business as he is promised to grant land at Cygnet River. He brings “two prefabricated houses. He had money and stock, tools and enterprise” (18). Chaine upon his arrival thinks that the whole Noongar environment is “empty [and] trackless” (17). He believes that the land has been “waiting for him” (17). Chaine is driven by a colonial attitude. Thus, he strives hard to earn money with full of his energy. In order to achieve his goals, he is also careful like Dr Cross in building a strategic relationship with the natives.

Chaine knows what he wants. Profits, not prophets. Knows what he wants done because he writes it down first. Some of it, leastways. Him and his lists. They will build a stand for the try-pot; they will make a garden, then tend and weed it. They spread pitch on

the boats the Yankees left them. They shepherd sheep, make fences to keep sheep in and kangaroos out. (301) Therefore, through environmental expansion Chaine gains power over the Aboriginals. Thereafter the settlers began to perceive the Aboriginal land and its inhabitants in a different way.

Furthermore, similar to Chaine, the Governor arrives on the Aboriginal land with his “wife, nine children, servants (two black boys among them), sheep, bullock, chickens... he had a longer list than Mr. Chaine! The new governor-resident brought so much with him that he needed a second ship. Fruit trees and tools and wheelbarrows and glass panes and mirrors, too...” (173). The Governor’s goal is to use the Aboriginal land as a product of agriculture. He contributes to the settlement by expanding the agriculture practices. Since the inhabitants of the land do not target to occupy the large areas for their own. The settlers become ambitious to occupy and use the land as they wish. Just as Andrea Gaynor argues in “Environmental Transformations”, “[t]he extensive environmental change wrought during the nineteenth century rested, perhaps most obviously, on the dominant colonial understanding that the indigenous people did not possess the land, which was therefore available for Europeans to occupy and use” (93).

Under the supervision of Chaine, the Governor constructs the farm. This farm becomes the heart of the colonial settlement. The settlers claim territory by creating an imaginary border. To denote the land ownership, the Governor plants a tree and names it as “Norfolk Pine” (179). He takes pride while mentioning the plant as, “[a]lthough it was only small, you could see the storybook shape of it already” (179). Subsequently, the greedy settlers fail to meet their profits in agriculture. Cultivation and yielding crops need much labour and time. The settlers do not wish to sacrifice their time in waiting to earn some amount of money after a long interval. Therefore, they focus on whale hunting. Chaine and his wife realize that “[w]haling was better than attempting to work this land with its topsy-turvy seasons and poor soil, and there’d be trouble with the natives, farming. The best land was their best land, too” (280).

Chaine very well knows that whaling can fetch a lot of money in a short period. Chaine believes in “Realism, not pessimism: good planning meant anticipating what might go wrong, and hardened the resolve” (280). As Andrea Gaynor points out, whaling brings wealth

because “[t]he Industrial Revolution in Britain had given rise to an insatiable demand for whale oil” (Gaynor 275).

Even though the Aboriginals of the land practice whale hunting, they habitually communicate with nature and animals. Since they survive out of nature, they consider nature as their primary source. They do not abuse nature for their selfishness. Aboriginal relationship with nature is in accordance with what Nancy Williams states, the Aboriginals “regard the environment as sentient and as communicating with them” (qtd. in Langton 93). The Aboriginals in the novel share a kinship relationship with whales. Bobby shares a close relationship with the whales and so he “heard the whales singing. They sang for him” (282). Aboriginal elders say that “he came from ocean and whales” (34).

The Aboriginals owe a deep reverence to nature. Because they believe that nature is alive. They share a deep connection with the ocean and animals. That is why they communicate with it. Aboriginal Menak “sensed something familiar with the depths of ocean, something hardly aware of its own self’s deep pulse until some melody and rhythm and baited light lured it up to air and sunlight and close to him... A whale” (250). The Aboriginal people view nature as equal to themselves. Hence, they live in peace with what nature provides them.

After a while, the settlers become well versed in whale hunting. By hunting whales, they start to explore nature differently. Along with Britishers, there are American (Yankees) whalers who invade the Aboriginal land. Aboriginal shore becomes busy as “hundred or more American whalers sailing along the south coast would be very good for business indeed” (122). The whites and the Yankees compete with each other in making profits by slaughtering whales. Consequently, the white settlers fish out the whales until it results in extinction.

... no more whales. No more ships...

Day after day the gentle land breezes persisted. Some days were bright blue and sparkling and the white sand shone; other days were steel-grey or black, and sea and sky merged so that there was no horizon; or it might be that a fine, misty rain fell all day ... but always the wind blew from land to sea. No ships came. No whales. (345)

Due to the business-oriented settlers, the Aboriginal land experiences ecological imbalance. The settlers

consider land as a tool and a product that is only meant to serve the needs of humans. When there is no other way for survival the Aboriginals try to resist by raising questions. Bobby translates Menak's words, "[m]y 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" (349).

CONCLUSION

The settler's disruption of environmental and social ecology is strongly proved by the extinction of Noongar Aboriginals and their habitat. The natural environment, culture, language, and tradition are forcefully taken away by the disruptors. Old Bobby when he communicates with the tourists, states that I am the only Noongar alive today who is mentioned in Dr Cross's papers, published in your own mother country. Your mother country, he said to the tourists, not mine because my country is here, and belonged to my father, and his father, and his father before him, too. But look at me now you wouldn't think that, not with all these people in their fine houses and noses in their rum who got no time to thank me or share what they have. (76)

The expansion of the settlement carries disease and corruption. The contamination of disease weakens the Aboriginal population both spiritually and physically. Meanwhile, the settlers concentrate on agricultural development. In addition to farming, the performance of whale hunting decreases the Aboriginal population. Both flora and fauna outnumber due to the changes in the natural environment. The own inhabitants of the land become unknown to their own environment.

Finally, the settler's separate nature from humans. This is because the colonizers have a human-centric approach. As Huggan and Tiffin confirm the settlers "assumes prioritisation of humans and human interests over those of other species on earth" (Huggan and Tiffin 5-6). The crisis between humans and nature will be solved only if humans pay attention to nature. A harmonious relationship can be achieved if nature is prioritised.

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