

A Critical Study of Kim Scott's *True Country*

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Abstract:

True Country, the debut book by Kim Scott, depicts the author's struggle with his Aboriginal identity in the context of an ethnic group that has been deracinated, deprived of its culture, reliant on a reciprocity-demanding support system, and subjected to abhorrent *ghettoization*. The destructive assimilative mechanisms of the white Australian country are the obvious cause. Billy, the narrator, goes out on a rummage and restores the significance of authentic Aboriginal identity on both the personal and social level. Billy is motivated by the eagerness to find the spiritual truth concerning this culture and himself. True Aboriginal identity restoration is still an issue of revolutionary cultural resistance since identity is inherently heterogeneous, slick, unsteady, and temporal. The author finds a "true country" - that may be realised outside of the realm of "Dreamtime reality" while rejecting white deracinating practises. The present study is focussed on Scott's vitriolic writing style, which reveals a planned cultural opposition against the assimilationist white nation-states of Australia.

Keywords: *Aboriginal, Assimilation, Marginalization, Self-discovery, Indigeneity.*

Introduction:

Kim Scott's *True Country* is an exploration of Aboriginal ties. The protagonist of the narrative is a young teacher named Billy Storey who has just learned that his paternal grandmother is Aboriginal. He now works at Karnama, a (fictitious) isolated Kimberly Aboriginal town in Australia's far north, in an effort to reconnect with his ancestry. He chooses the harsh environment of the wilderness over the capitalist world of Europe and learns how social discrimination and official policies of cultural and biological assimilation have excluded him in the process. The novel's self-realization and socialisation processes represent a growth of Aboriginal culture and its particular form of civilization.

The construction of an identity that proves an individual identity exists within a collective identity serves as the novel's climax, with the discovery of one identity inexorably leading to the discovery of another. Through the *modus operandi*, which is a little bit strategized, a little bit

fresh, and a little bit special, the chief narrator Billy's recovery of self and that of the restoration of the Karnama people reach a climax.

Main Thrust:

Aboriginal culture, geography, displacement, belonging, and home are some of Scott's themes. His voice is a blend of hope and despondency. One of the primary characters of the novel, Billy and his wife Liz fly into Karnama at the beginning of the story. He comes to the neighbourhood school to teach. Though we don't learn what this is until towards the conclusion of the first part of the story (at a distance of one-third), he is also looking for something within himself. Billy belongs to the Aboriginal world even though he lacks the majority of the distinctive physiognomic traits of Aboriginal people. He leaves his birthplace and strains every nerve to know the Aboriginal people and the strange new world they inhabit. He appears content with his current situation, yet he can still feel the Native American blood coursing through him. He has been thrilled to learn that he is descended from Aboriginal people. He once said of his exoticism as a young lad, “[...] it was like being an American Indian on the movies”. Therefore, he yearns to learn more about this unexplored aspect of himself. Billy is concerned that the Aboriginal people of Karnama won't embrace him because he is fully aware that they do not like outsiders assimilating into their culture. Billy joins the local Aboriginal community while residing in Karnama, yet he still feels out of place: “But I don't feel Aboriginal, I can't say that. I don't understand. Does it mean you feel lost, displaced? But doesn't everyone? And I just wanted to come to a place like this, where some things that happened a long time ago, where I come from, that I have only heard or read of, are still happening here, maybe.” As he had anticipated, he feels uncomfortable in this Aboriginal society for many reasons. He is pale. Besides, there are innumerable cultural differences between the white and the Aboriginals. He has scarcely any opportunity to contrast these culturally diverse societies. White people and the indigenous population share many commonalities, yet there are also numerous distinctions, “[...] the difference in smell and touch” and many others.

The relationship between Aboriginal people and those closest to them is distinct, as are their values and life goals. Raphael, one of the Aboriginal characters in *True Country*, shares a home with Stella, the woman he married, and Gloria, his mistress. Interestingly, these two ladies do not compete for a man's affections; instead, they work together to protect one another from an

abusive spouse. Raphael beats them before everybody assuming them to be his property only to show his strength and whip. Billy finds it extremely challenging to comprehend both the cultural norms and behaviour of the Aboriginal people.

Billy is an outsider in both the white as well as the Aboriginal worlds because he occupies a space between them. Which aspect of his identity is closest to his heart is unknown to him. He unquestionably has an impact from both of these realms. Because he cannot abide the idea that even the youngest, least-educated children know who they are and where they belong, but he does not, it is crucial for him to discover his own sense of self in Karnama. The work frequently expresses Billy's ambiguity on who he is. He thinks he is an Aboriginal person in particular circumstances, such when performing a traditional Aboriginal dance corroboree: "I'm Aboriginal, of Aboriginal descent. A bit of tarbrush in me". Initially he feels that he is an outsider among his neighbourhood. But gradually this seems to be his home. He strives to know everything about Aboriginal people in order to better understand himself. The past and present of the Aboriginals are the two factors that can aid him in this.

Billy discovers from two different sources about the background of Karnama and its inhabitants. One of these comes from a written report in the missionary diary, which is pretty trustworthy. However, the narration of Fatima—which is provided by an elderly Aboriginal woman—is far more engaging. He is able to picture the lives of his ancestors thanks to the stories mother tells him. But Billy does not feel like he belongs in this history and does not fit in this: "[...] Billy was the man to write the stories, stories in which he didn't belong". He laments not interviewing his grandmother before she passed away and choosing to speak with wholly an odd woman. He was unable to enquire grandma numerous questions regarding his family history and the heritage she had left him. Billy finds it difficult to express his inner sentiments to total strangers. He now laments not having the opportunity to question his grandmother about his heritage.

Billy is continually beset by questions about his personality across the entire narrative. It's crucial for him to be acknowledged by other Aboriginal people as being one of them. Billy finally comes to terms with his Aboriginal identity towards the conclusion of the story: "Caught in this shell, and yet within the roaring wind and rain, he felt a part of it all". The area is no longer exotic, but rather a place where he is at home. He suddenly understands who he is and where he fits into society and the wider universe.

Billy is trying to form a purposeful cultural identity from the recent history of the Aboriginals. At Karnama, Billy finds a village in disarray marked by handouts from the government, alcoholism, wife beating, petrol sniffing, and a disregard for customary beliefs and traditions. A depressingly familiar laundry list of social ills validates the arrogant racial preconceptions of Billy's original white community.

The novel follows us through a single academic year as well as the Wet, Dry, and Wet periods of Australia's tropical northern in a series of brief, tightly related events evocative of David Ireland's *The Glass Canoe* (1976). There is no plot, at least not until we take a look back and notice the changes.

There are also tales about an elderly woman named Fatima, the mission's first-born. Billy reads aloud to his class while transcribing from his tape recorder. Because this is an oral culture, the kids can quote large sections of the movies they watched the night before even while they are being chastised for not learning from books. These stories, on one level, are ones of loss and cultural and emotional displacement. They relate how she was forcibly removed from her family, how her language was lost, and how white missionaries murdered her elders. However, the stories' strength lies in their ability to challenge the official white versions of history found in the mission journals as well as in the dignified simplicity and passion with which they are recounted. As Billy starts to realize, such storytelling is a demand for justice as well as a means of expressing one's sentiments. He accepts Fatima's offer to collaborate on writing her stories after arming himself with the contemporary tools of narration—the tape recorder and the written word: “You can write what I say, what we say, all together ... So people will read it, and know.”

Billy and his wife Liz are thrown into an Aboriginal village that seems to be in disarray while living in a Christian mission that is now in decline and a government administrative outpost that is having trouble keeping workers. However, Billy is surprisingly intrigued to the locals and the astounding surroundings they inhabit. As other individuals' voices begin to dominate the second half of the work, Billy's identity quest progressively merges with a bigger cultural story. These are more and more the voices of misinformation about Aboriginal and white civilizations, as well as those of uncertainty, rage, and helplessness. The assassination of the little child Franny in Broome by callous white thugs who escape punishment under the white law is one of the most horrifying examples of the social impotence of Aboriginal people. Franny's

death, which is based on a true story from the turn of the century, marks a political turning point in the book because of the appalling injustice it demands.

The first reaction for Billy, to whom the story now returns, is withdrawal or disengagement — a resigned acceptance of his own powerlessness in the face of the novel's seemingly insurmountable social issues. Unwilling to tell stories, he abandons Fatima's accounts of her personal and historical history incomplete in order to go to the river feeling dejected and disconnected. The realities of powerlessness are not satisfactorily addressed in *True Country*. This nation's essence is still vague—possibly on purpose—and is described in exquisitely poetic words as a sort of release or rebirth.

Conclusion:

Thus, the novel *True Country* appears to be a challenge to our preconceived notions and preferences that outline our mental and emotional capacities and which oppose the Westernized way of our interpretive methods. It is not important how well a piece of literature captures the 'Other', but rather to acknowledge that writing offers a unique forum for engaging with that which is different or the 'Other'. It's not a novel from Europe. It is an acculturation experience. It is a progression into contemporary Aboriginal culture, which is marginalized, dominant, obscure, secretive, strong, and hospitable.

True Country's polyphonic diversity confronts the Western ideological *monoglossia* and goes beyond simply corroborating a collective viewpoint that seeks to reclaim its identity from multiple angles. Along with Billy, the primary narrator, the voices of Sebastian, Fatima, Deslie, and other unnamed Aboriginal Elders all contribute to the novel's polyphonic structure and work to undermine the strong *monoglossic* ideology that seeks to create a fictitious 'modern' community. By attacking the source of dominance and exploitation of implicit and explicit power systems, all of these techniques work to re-establish the sense of community.

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