

(Re) negotiating Aboriginal Identity and Marginality in *'Benang: From the Heart'*

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The indigenous peoples of Australia, i.e., the Aboriginals, are the native people of the Australian continent. They are the proud inheritors of the world's longest continuing art tradition and oldest living culture as they had remained unchanged since its beginning in the Dreamtime. With the advent of the European settlers in Australia, they became the victims of colonial injustice meted out to them by the colonizers. Aboriginals were dispossessed of their land by the colonizers, and have been subjected to social, political and historical marginalization by the White settlers.

"Their marginality was established in the first hundred years of settlement, with dislocation, segregation, neglect and structural marginalization of the colonial period" (Moore 124). The historical process of marginalization can be understood from the pre-national period and early national period. Before 1905, the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples in Australia was profound and multifaceted, characterized by dispossession of land, violent conflict, forced removal from traditional territories, cultural suppression, and discriminatory policies. It was the period of colonial dispossession, violent conflicts between the settlers and Aboriginals and these conflicts resulted in massacre of Aboriginals, Forced assimilation, racial discrimination, denial of citizenship and legal rights and cultural suppression. The multi-faceted marginalization of Aboriginals continues to have lasting impacts on Indigenous communities, contributing to ongoing disparities in health, education, and socio-economic outcomes.

In the early national period, the attitude of the government towards Aborigines remained indifferent. They were looked at with contempt, indignation, and inferiority. "Aboriginal people continued to be outside

the community of the Australian nation. Their exclusion was such that the many living on reserves were ‘impoverished, their housing was rudimentary, education was basic or non-existent, health status was low, and employment was forced and unremunerated’ (Sullivan 3). They were the Australian citizen without citizenship, without civic rights, without freedom to marry, move and gain work. They were the victim of the racial policies of eugenics and miscegenation in which “government sought to segregate ‘full bloods’ on reserves on the basis that they were incapable of surviving in the modern world and would die out. At the same time, they sought to ‘absorb’ the half-castes by ‘breeding out’ their color in order that they might fit in” (Moore 125).

The theme of marginality and identity is central to many works by Aboriginal authors, reflecting the experiences and struggles of Indigenous peoples in asserting their cultural identity within the context of colonialism, racism, and ongoing socio-political challenges. Many Aboriginal authors explore the complexities of cultural identity, including the tension between traditional Indigenous values and contemporary Western influences. Aboriginal literature often portrays the experiences of marginalization and discrimination faced by Indigenous peoples within broader society. They frequently explore the intersections of Indigenous identity with other aspects of identity, such as gender, sexuality, and class. They may examine how multiple forms of marginalization intersect to shape individuals’ experiences and perspectives within Indigenous communities and society at large. Some notable Aboriginal authors whose works engage with these themes include Alexis Wright, and Kim Scott.

To understand the concept of marginality in the works of these authors, it becomes highly significant to understand multiple facets of marginality and its role in shaping the relations in the process of cross-cultural contact. Sociologist Gino Germani in his book *Marginality* defines marginalization as “lack of participation of individual and groups in those spheres in which, according to determined criteria, they might be expected to participate” (49).

In the backdrop of the above given definition, marginalization in Australian society has a long history where Aboriginals faced it in every sphere of

their lives. They are the disadvantaged section of Australian society who have been deprived of their traditional lands, Aboriginal identity, cultural practices, native languages, socio-economic and political rights and their right to sovereignty and self-determination. In Aboriginal society, marginality manifests itself in different forms and degrees of seriousness. The multiple facets of marginality are depicted by Aboriginal authors who portray it with the help of different character who are the victims of different forms of marginality at the hand of white people.”Marginality is a complex condition of disadvantage which individuals and communities experience as a result of vulnerabilities that may arise from unfavorable environment, cultural, social and political conditions of life” (Mehretu et.al).

“*Benang: From the Heart*” is a novel written by Kim Scott, an Indigenous Australian author, which explores themes of identity, marginalization, and cultural survival among the Noongar people of Western Australia. In the novel, marginalization is a central theme, as it depicts the historical and ongoing impact of colonization on Indigenous communities. In this novel, Harley attempts to uncover his family history of five generations from 1920-1990. In Australia, it was the colonial period in which different racially biased policies were adopted by different authorities in order to marginalize Aboriginals. In this novel, the writer incorporates the issue of distorted identity along with colonial violence.

Marginalization is the process in which the dominant forces deprive the oppressed people from their sovereignty, self-determination, socio-cultural and economic freedoms. The form of marginality that has been witnessed in Australia is systematic marginality, which can be defined as “Systemic marginality results from disadvantages which people and communities experience in a socially constructed system of inequitable relations within a hegemonic order that allows one set of individuals and communities to exercise undue power and control over another set with the latter manifesting one or a number of vulnerability markers based on class, ethnicity, age, gender and other similar characteristics” (Mehretu et al. 91).

Kim Scott's "*Benang*" presents the complexities of Aboriginal identity and marginality in Australia. The novel revisits the colonial history of Aboriginals in which they are colonized others. The novel exposes the social realities of the Aboriginal society. The novel follows the protagonist, who inherits a mixed identity from two different cultures and he grapples with the challenges of belonging in a society marked by systemic racism and cultural erasure. Through Harley's journey of self-discovery, "*Benang*" highlights the continuing legacies of colonialism and the ongoing struggles faced by Aboriginal peoples in asserting their indigenous identity and reclaiming their place in the Australian society. Harley's quest to revisit and renegotiate his Aboriginal identity brings him closer to the multiple facets of Aboriginality.

Postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon have explored the dynamics of power and resistance in colonial and postcolonial societies, emphasizing the ways in which colonialism perpetuates structures of domination and marginalization. The Australian Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson has also examined the impact of colonization on Indigenous communities. She highlights the resilience and agency of Indigenous peoples in the face of ongoing oppression.

In the novel, Harley's quest to understand his Aboriginal heritage and reconcile it with his European ancestry. As a mixed-race individual, Harley occupies a liminal space within society, neither fully accepted by the white community nor fully embraced by his Aboriginal relatives. His journey towards self-discovery renders him a sense of alienation, confusion, and internal conflict, as he grapples with questions of belonging and identity. Through Harley's perspective, Scott explores the complexities of racial identity and the ways in which it intersects with notions of power and privilege.

The novel sheds light on the ongoing impact of colonialism on Aboriginal communities, as seen in the persistence of systemic racism, cultural appropriation, and the erasure of Indigenous knowledge and traditions. Harley's family history, marked by displacement, violence, and cultural loss, serves as a small-scale version of the broader Indigenous experience

in Australia. Through the character of Harley, Scott highlights the resilience and survival strategies employed by Aboriginal peoples in the face of ongoing oppression, challenging dominant narratives of victimhood and defeat.

In the novel, there are different Aboriginal characters who are the victims of some form of marginalization. The demeanor of the white characters in the novel represent the mindset of the white males to make Australia a country of white people where the black faces would be wiped out. Firstly, the forced removal of the half-caste children followed by their segregation from Aboriginal cultural practices and then the rampant sexual abuse of half caste and full blood women made them victims of all forms of exploitation and marginalization. The policy of eugenics and miscegenation were mainly aimed at marginalizing blacks in Australia. Richie Howitt relates Aboriginal marginalization with the development of Australian capitalism and observes “The dialectical relations between Aboriginal marginalization and the empowerment of the ‘dominant culture’ in Australian society seemed to me to be far from marginal issues, in terms of both theoretical and practical agendas. In the particular case of Australia, dispossession of Aboriginal people was central to the development of Australian capitalism” (7).

Aboriginal women were twice-marginalized owing to the practices followed in colonial Australia. Sexual freedom of Aboriginal women was curbed in a variety of ways. Aboriginal women were seen as sex objects used as experiments by the settlers. The repression of sexual freedom of Aboriginal women eventually resulted in their exploitation by the white people. “Sexual violence in the Australian history is often intertwined with race relations and solidifying racial and gender distinctions. Consequently, sexual violence in Australian history reflects colonial anxieties over both masculinity and power” (Smith 2).

The colonial experiences of the colonized other have always been an inalienable part of their lives as they have been the victims of oppression, racial discrimination, marginalization and exploitation. It remains an unachievable desire for the colonized to efface the traumatic memories

of their colonial past. Colonization has a “fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair results” (Said 207).

Overall, “*Benang*” offers a poignant exploration of marginalization and its profound impact on individuals, families, and communities, while also celebrating the resilience and survival of Indigenous cultures in the face of adversity.

Today’s Aboriginal society is very different from those of earlier times. Cultural changes have taken place in accordance with the global flow. These changes have taken place due to their access to electronic media, their gradual entry in the workplaces and cultural contacts. The government has also been trying for the inclusion of Aboriginals in the multicultural Australian society. “These efforts began with the repeal of discriminatory legislation that had restricted access to social security (for employment, maternity allowance, family allowance, sickness benefits, the old age pension). They have extended civil and political rights to Aboriginals, including the right to consume alcohol and be paid equal wages, and recognized rights such as to land” (Moore 126). The approach for the multiculturalist inclusion of Aboriginal is only benefitting a bunch of people while the major portion of the Aboriginal population is still living in deplorable condition. There is still “a significant gap in Aboriginal education participation and attainment, health status, extent of home ownership and housing quality and overcrowding, unemployment and representation in the justice system” (Australian Institute of health and Welfare). There a more inclusive approach needs to followed by the government in order to uplift the marginalized. Uplifting marginalized sections of society involves addressing systemic barriers and creating opportunities for equitable access to resources, representation, and empowerment.

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