

Exile Within: Displacement and the Search for Self in *True Country*

Saurabh Meena

Indigenous communities across the world are connected to their traditional lands. They have a deep-rooted history with the land and therefore the land is of sacred value to them. Land is an inalienable part of their life since they are completely dependent on it for their sustenance. Indigenous people also share a deep spiritual relationship with the land, which is so fundamental to their existence. Land is also associated with their identity. Depriving them of their land deprives them of their history, language, cultural existence and traditional knowledge systems. The onslaught of colonization devastated the entire socio-cultural patterns of Indigenous societies across the world. Self-sustained societies became reliant on European goods for their livelihood.

In the traditional kinship systems, through the customary law, they cherished gender equality, social position, integrated identity, and sexual autonomy. The cultural transformation that took place with the advent of colonizers made them the victims of exploitation, marginalization, and inhuman treatment. The biased racial policies of the colonizers affected them the worst. From the breadwinners of the family, they were made dependent by curbing the social and economic autonomy by the Christian patriarchal order.

The Natives became dependent on the colonizers and started to absorb the mores and manners of the colonizers, which alienated them from their language, culture, history and indigenous identity. International organizations have given recognition to the first people of the land and are consistently working to conserve their indigenous knowledge and value system, with the aim to combat the modern problems being faced by the Aborigines in modern society. They share a unique relationship

with nature, which they have been conserving for ages. Land continues to remain an essential component for the socio-cultural existence of their indigenous identity. With the loss of their ancestral land, their sacred relationship with the land has also been jeopardised. Many activists have joined in for the Aboriginals' struggle for their land rights. Their concerns have been taken into account in Article 25 of the draft of United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

Indigenous people have the right to maintain and strengthen their indistinctive spiritual and material relationship with the lands, territories, water and coastal seas and other resources which they have traditionally owned for otherwise occupied or used, and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard. (6)

Space is highly significant in the literary works of Fourth World literature and postcolonial literary theories. "A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place" (Ashcroft et al. 21). The importance of land and location is well established in the field of postcolonial studies as space is also an important tool to deconstruct the dominant power structures. Space and identity are both intertwined. The quest for identity in postcolonial novels is associated with space. Therefore, space becomes a tool to resist the dominant forces and to trace the identity of the self, and to rediscover identity which will lead to disestablishment of the established narratives. As the "authentic and essentialist conceptions of identity are often associated with exclusivist claims to territory and space. In turn, this geographical imagination of identity leads to the persistent understanding of colonialism in terms of simple opposition between colonizers and colonized" (Barnett 8).

In Australian literature, there are numerous prominent Aboriginal writers who strive to highlight the issues faced by the indigenous communities of Australia. Among all these issues, land is a pivotal one. Aboriginal people are a part of the marginalized and vulnerable section of society.

They are the victims of socio-political and economic marginalization in their country. Though they are the native people of Australia, they are struggling to live a dignified life. For decades, they have been demanding the native land titles to protect their lands from being taken away by multiple agencies. Indigenous communities across the world are facing forcible removal and displacement from their traditional lands. These lands are being taken away by the governments and corporate houses for the extraction and exploitation of minerals and natural resources, the construction of dams, and for the multiple development projects. The cases of forcible removal and displacement of Indigenous people are being reported across the countries with a significant native population.

Kim Scott is a renowned Aboriginal writer who seeks to illuminate various aspects of the lives of Aboriginal people in Australia. In his novels, he also incorporates the issue of the displacement of Aboriginals from their native lands and their confinement in the reserves controlled by the state. His novel *True Country* reveals the journey of the protagonist Billy, who explores his aboriginal identity by coming back to his own land and by spending his days among the people of his community. Billy strives to trace his own identity from the land of Karnama. The space provides him a sense of connectedness as he finds himself attached to the people of Karnama and a sense of belonging develops within him.

He explores his individual identity among the people of the Aboriginal settlement. Karnama becomes a place for him to offer a conclusion to his conflicting ideas relating to his identity. As Billy says “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. My grandmother must have been Aboriginal like you, dark. My grandmother is part . . . My father told me, but no one” (Scott 82).

In postcolonial theory, space is not just a physical territory rather “space itself becomes a kind of neutral grid on which cultural differences, historical memory and societal organization are inscribed” (Gupta 6).

Space is the platform for cultural encounters and is the place from where 'new culture' originates and cultural transformation takes place. The postcolonial space urges Billy to renegotiate his identity. Within a very short period of time, he starts to feel connected to the land and the people of the mission. He challenges the western way of knowing by expressing his desire to trace his Aboriginal identity and questions the causes that deprived him of his own culture. His unfamiliarity to the Aboriginal culture bequeaths him a sense that though the people of Karnama have been living a miserable life without basic amenities, yet they fare better and are happier than him as they know the land and through the cultural sense they all are deeply connected to each other. His purpose of coming to Karnama becomes irrelevant to him. Billy says, "I don't know anything of the old ways; a few words, this and that. But there's something there that's what I reckon. Should we try and put it all together and believe in it? Or try and rediscover things, like that renaissance thing?" (Scott 83).

Billy's quest for identity compels him to question the Euro-Centric approach and the ways of knowing. He starts to take pride in his own Aboriginal identity irrespective of the past identities as "identities are ever-changing and impossible to fix: the need to negotiate identities is therefore constant" (Bhabha 73). In the novel, Aboriginal people of Karnama are cognizant of the manner in which Aboriginal society is disintegrating due to the introduction of certain vices by the white people, which makes them highly critical of them.

Tell us, we learned anything from white man yet? Nowadays people make a mistake. Maybe tired, Little by little Aborigine going down. Drinking and dying. Making circles, litter and more little. We don't like looking, and seeing it that way. We want to fly up again. They can't forget about our roots, they can't leave behind and go to the Whiteman roots. That no good. (Scott 124)

Karnama is not just a physical space for the novelist. It is the platform for the writer from where he gives a voice to the voiceless people. Almost a century has passed since the federation came into existence

but the First Nation people are still living in abject poverty. The white intrusion in the Aboriginal practices is making them more segregated from their cultural identity. In the novel, the character of Gerrard laments over the cultural decay of the modern Aboriginal society due to the intrusion of white society into their cultural sphere. He expresses his umbrage by saying:

In the old days we did look after our sacred sites ourselves, without letting white people, white men, women, take care of them. We know what to do. These others shouldn't interfere with our sacred things. Kiddies of ours, young men even, they not allowed to go near our sacred sites, trees even, that was anywhere in the bush. We didn't let them know because they wasn't men. They had to be initiated before they could go to these things and they sacred to us. They are very sacred things. We didn't say nothing to nobody, we just look after these things ourselves. That's why we don't like white women or white men coming to ask different things about our things, or saying we should do thinsm and why don't we. that's our sacred things. They studying us too? Like Animals? Or maybe they want to steal our secrets, and when even the black man has lost his special things and his magic, then-hey, here it is- the white fell as have it and they use it on us. (Scott 143)

This state-sponsored intrusion into the cultural sphere is aimed at segregation of Aboriginals from the sacred sites from where their socio-cultural identity originates. Owing to the deprivation of Aborigines from their sacred sites, the society is disintegrating. The 'One Australia' terminology is used repeatedly in the political discourse of the country which makes everyone suspicious of the malafide intentions of the regimes which are intolerant to the diversified Australian society.

Apart from Australian Aboriginals, Indigenous people have been struggling for their land rights and political rights. The land they occupy is of greater importance due to the availability of valuable minerals on their lands. The increasing interference of the ruling governments, related organizations, and corporate houses has managed to create a severe

existential threat to their socio-political identity. The increasing number of cases of forcible removal and dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands is a matter of grave concern for policy makers across the world. It is the high time when they should be allowed the collective right to self-determination, territorial integrity, and sovereignty. These rights will surely empower them in every sphere of their lives. It will help them to revive the declining cultural practices and management of their lands by their choices

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