

REDISCOVERING IDENTITY CULTURAL RECONNECTION IN KIM SCOTT'S TABOO

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Abstract

The paper *Rediscovering Identity Cultural Reconnection in Kim Scott's Taboo* presents a comprehensive overview of Kim Scott's *Taboo* and examines how Scott employs the journey of his characters, particularly that of Tilly, to represent both individual and collective Aboriginal quests for belonging and self-definition amidst a fractured cultural landscape. Through a detailed and exhaustive narrative that spans generational memory, *Taboo* confronts the themes of forced assimilation, land dispossession, and the often fraught, painful path to reconciliation. Central to this analysis is the symbolic return to ancestral land as a critical point of healing—a reclamation of both physical space and cultural identity, which Scott situates within the larger discourse on Indigenous sovereignty and the reclamation of agency. By integrating historical truths with fictional elements, Scott crafts a 'fictocritical' approach, blending critique with storytelling to amplify the voices and experiences of the Nyoongar people. This study aims to explore how *Taboo* not only challenges the narratives imposed by settler society but also reaffirms the resilience and resurgence of Aboriginal identity through acts of cultural and historical reconnection.

Keywords: *aboriginal, fictocritical, indigenous, scott, and noongar.*

Introduction: Contextualizing Aboriginal Literature and Identity

Aboriginal literature has emerged as a vital medium for expressing and asserting Indigenous identity to narrate their stories and experiences within the broader socio-political fabric of Australia. Historically, Aboriginal culture relied on oral storytelling to pass down knowledge, heritage, and spirituality across generations. This tradition, rich with mythological narratives and cultural teachings, has endured as has been said,

Aboriginal communities faced severe colonial disruptions. With the advent of written Aboriginal literature, Indigenous authors have transitioned their oral heritage into written narratives that allow for both cultural preservation and a reclamation of identity. This transformation has given Indigenous writers the means to voice their experiences, particularly concerning historical injustices, cultural survival, and their ongoing struggle for equality and recognition in Australian society. (Bourke 85)

Contemporary Aboriginal literature spans genres such as autobiography, poetry, fiction, and drama, each exploring the complex layers of Aboriginal identity. Themes

of resilience, alienation, and resistance feature prominently, portraying the Indigenous experience within a colonial framework that historically sought to erase their presence. By addressing issues like land rights, cultural revitalization, and social autonomy, Aboriginal literature advocates for justice, memorializes Aboriginal heritage, and bridges the gaps in understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This body of work serves not only as a form of cultural expression but as a form of social activism, educating audiences about Indigenous history, dispelling stereotypes, and fostering empathy.

Within this legendary tradition, Kim Scott stands out as a significant contemporary voice. Scott has dedicated his career to exploring the layers of Indigenous identity, trauma, and revival through his writing. His novel *Taboo* exemplifies his approach, drawing on both personal and collective histories to illuminate the deep-rooted cultural connections that persist despite colonial oppression. Set against the backdrop of a rural Western Australian community, Connor says,

Taboo follows the protagonist, Tilly, and her companions as they return to ancestral lands scarred

by historical violence. Through their journey, Scott examines the complex processes of healing and reconciliation, underscoring the role of cultural reconnection in restoring identity and dignity to Aboriginal communities. (Connor 87)

Taboo reflects the broader themes within Aboriginal literature, including the intricate relationship between land and identity, the intergenerational transmission of trauma, and the possibility of renewal. The novel explores how cultural practices—such as storytelling, ceremonies, and shared memory—become pathways for Indigenous people to reassert their identity and reshape their narratives within a society that has long marginalized them. Through *Taboo*, Scott contributes to the discourse on Indigenous identity, portraying it not as a static concept but as a dynamic and evolving journey that intertwines personal healing with the collective revival of culture and tradition (Dodson 256). This work continues to influence contemporary Aboriginal literature, encouraging readers to recognize the power of Indigenous storytelling in fostering understanding, empathy, and, ultimately, reconciliation.

Colonial Trauma and Its Legacy in *Taboo*

In *Taboo*, Scott details the enduring effects of colonial trauma on Indigenous communities, illuminating how historical violence has left a lasting impact on Aboriginal identity, culture, and social structures. The novel brings to light the harsh realities faced by Aboriginal people due to the systematic oppression they endured under colonial rule, depicting how the scars of this violence remain deeply embedded in the collective psyche of Indigenous communities. Through the novel's characters and their experiences, Scott captures the pervasive legacy of trauma passed down through generations, showing how these painful histories continue to influence and shape the lives of Aboriginal people today.

One of the central themes in *Taboo* is the experience of land dispossession and its profound implications for Aboriginal identity. For Indigenous Australians, the land is not merely a place of residence but a source of cultural, spiritual, and ancestral connection. Colonial authorities forcibly removed Aboriginal people from their ancestral lands, severing this crucial bond and fracturing their sense of identity and belonging. Scott portrays this disconnection

in the lives of his characters, especially as they attempt to reclaim their heritage and reconnect with the land. The journey back to ancestral grounds in *Taboo* is both a physical and symbolic return, representing the characters' desire to heal and rebuild a relationship with their roots despite the historical traumas that have tainted these lands (Stephen 104).

Taboo opens with a striking scene: two individuals and a skeleton in a runaway semi-trailer spilling wheat as it barrels down a street, only to come to rest in a place historically marked by massacre. This vivid opening sets a powerful tone, underlined by Scott's caution to readers—*Taboo* is no fairy tale but rather a narrative drawn from raw, often painful realities. In his Afterword, Scott acknowledges that while the work is fictional, it touches on “real events, people, and landscapes,” bridging storytelling with the weight of historical trauma and cultural memory.

Scott's portrayal of landscape transcends the traditional role of setting and becomes a dynamic force in the narrative. Unlike many Western Australian writers, such as Tim Winton and Craig Silvey, who feature landscape as a character, Scott's depiction is more profound, immersive, and deeply intuitive. The landscape in *Taboo* does not merely serve as a backdrop but is a living, breathing entity that interacts with the characters, shaping their experiences and emotions. It alternately embraces and excludes its inhabitants, as though it holds memories and secrets of its own. Gunn Et al mention

Scott's landscape is rich with symbolism and energy. Whether he describes an old woman hidden within the vibrant bougainvillea or characters fragmented in the “scattered shards of sunlight,” the natural world is ever-present, speaking and shifting with intent. Trees, as described by Scott, bear scars of history, bristle at intrusions like a passing bus, and toss their leaves in reaction to impending storms. The wind, rain, and shadows each take on a life of their own, exhaling, shredding, or roaring in a reflection of the human condition within the story. (Gunn Et al 276)

However, Scott does not position this landscape as either inherently malevolent or nurturing. It is simply part of the universe, intertwined with humanity—flawed, occasionally heroic, and mostly marked by despair. In this

way, the land is as much a character as any of the people within *Taboo*, existing as a space where both healing and harm coexist. The landscape is not a passive element but a participant in the story, urging readers to see the world, and their own place within it, through a different, more sensitive lens.

Taboo centers on flawed, deeply human lives, with the character of Tilly acting as the narrative's emotional pivot. Tilly, emerging from the wreckage of a runaway truck, embodies both resilience and secret trauma. She is caught between two worlds—her white mother and Aboriginal father are both dead, and she returns to a place of deep historical significance: the "massacre place." This place, both a site of personal and collective pain, calls to Tilly, but it also demands that she confront the legacies of her ancestors and resist the claims made upon her by the land, her foster father, and his son.

The disquiet that Tilly experiences, which permeates the narrative, is mirrored by the broader social and environmental landscape. The band of individuals gathered around the Peace Park at the opening of a supposed reconciliation effort sense Tilly's inner turmoil but are unable to heal it. Their collective journey towards reconciliation is thwarted by the weight of unresolved trauma, which remains an unspoken undercurrent in the novel.

Scott's land, with its frizzing discontent and hostile terrain—"weeds, stones, gullies, rocks erupting, punching and lunging about"—acts as an extension of the internal chaos the characters endure. The "big old sky above" looms over it all, a constant reminder of the vastness of the issues at play, stretching over a history that remains unaddressed. In this context, the land is not simply a passive setting; it is as active, unsettled, and charged as the people who inhabit it. It shapes the characters' experiences, reflecting the deep wounds of colonial violence, displacement, and the ongoing struggle for reconciliation (Rowley 164).

Scott masterfully transforms the landscape into a living, breathing language, a technique that highlights the profound connection between the land and the people who inhabit it. The characters in the novel speak the "old language," a phrase that echoes throughout the narrative,

signifying not just words but an entire worldview tied to culture, history, and memory. Scott doesn't just use language as a tool for communication—he imbues it with life, as the natural world itself becomes a language of expression. Parrots, eagles, cockatoos, even the earth, sky, and lightning all speak, creating a dynamic, immersive world where every element is a part of the ongoing dialogue.

The people in *Taboo*—both old and young—express themselves in circular patterns of speech, a style deeply rooted in oral storytelling traditions. This cyclical, timeless way of speaking connects them not only to their ancestors but also to their future, conveying a sense of continuity and survival. They speak of generational despair, acknowledging the weight of history while holding onto the hope that healing and reconciliation are possible. Their words carry the emotional gravity of their struggles, expressing both personal and collective loss.

Scott's characters, through their dialogue, engage in a deep reckoning with the past, speaking of what could have been done differently and recognizing the complexities of their identity as Noongar people. Their grief is not just a personal sorrow but a communal one, reflected in language that merges breath, feeling, and fire—a potent mixture that sings them into the present and future. For Scott's characters, language becomes an act of survival, a tool for remembering, and a way of holding onto their identity in the face of overwhelming loss and dislocation. This is language that transcends mere communication; it is a living, breathing expression of their collective existence.

Taboo concludes in a way that mirrors its opening, reinforcing the cyclical nature of both the story and the broader experience it represents. The novel begins and ends with a reminder of how stories, like the land, are marked by their origins and shaped by their context. The circularity of Scott's narrative is a reflection of the continuing struggles and the inherited legacies of dispossession, abuse, colonialism, addiction, and racism that define the lives of his characters. Through this cyclical structure, Scott highlights the intergenerational trauma that remains unresolved, but also subtly points to the potential for continuity and renewal within Indigenous communities.

Scott's prose, rich with lyricism and tinged with melancholy, serves to convey the gravity of these issues while also bearing witness to the resilience and complexity of the individuals involved. His characters are profoundly aware of their own shortcomings, yet they also demonstrate a remarkable capacity for forgiveness—both for themselves and others. This ambivalence between despair and hope infuses the narrative, creating a powerful tension throughout the novel. There are no easy resolutions or quick fixes; the challenges faced by the First Nations people in the story, particularly in dealing with colonial legacies, are presented without simplification.

Despite the gravity of the themes, *Taboo* is not a grim or hopeless tale. The clarity and beauty of Scott's writing elevate the novel beyond mere despair, offering a nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of Aboriginal people. The complexity of Tilly's character—simultaneously a descendant and an ancestress—lingers long after the final page. She embodies the duality of the past and future, the living and the dead, a figure who resonates deeply like other memorable characters in literature, such as Meggie in *Elemental* and the young Sally Morgan in *My Place*. Through Tilly, Scott captures the profound emotional and spiritual journey of reconciliation, reminding readers that while there may be no perfect words or easy answers, there is always room for reflection, growth, and the enduring power of storytelling.

Moreover, *Taboo* explores the destructive impact of forced assimilation policies, where Indigenous people were compelled to adopt European cultural norms at the expense of their own traditions and practices. The novel exposes the psychological and social toll of these assimilation efforts, portraying how such policies led to cultural erasure and identity crises for many Aboriginal people. By examining these themes, Scott illustrates how the colonial project sought not only to control Indigenous lands but also to strip Aboriginal people of their cultural autonomy.

Through his portrayal of colonial trauma, Scott emphasizes the resilience of Aboriginal communities as they confront and resist the weight of this legacy. *Taboo* ultimately suggests that reconciling with the past, while fraught with pain, is essential for cultural restoration and

individual healing. By foregrounding the voices of Indigenous characters who are determined to reclaim their heritage, Scott underscores the enduring strength of Aboriginal identity amidst the remnants of colonial trauma. Trocino rightly observes in this connection,

Through the portrayal of ancestral land reclamation, Scott suggests that the path to healing lies in reconnecting with Indigenous roots and embracing traditional values. *Taboo* captures the profound impact of land as a symbol of healing, showing how, for Aboriginal people, returning to their ancestral grounds is not just a reclaiming of territory, but a transformative act that reasserts their place and identity within the world. (Trocino 106)

Cultural Reconnection and Identity Formation

In *Taboo*, Kim Scott examines the theme of cultural reconnection as a crucial path to identity formation and resilience for Indigenous characters. Central to this journey is Tilly, who, along with other members of the Nyoongar community, embarks on a personal and collective rediscovery of Aboriginal roots. This journey is one of both literal and symbolic significance, representing the characters' efforts to understand their place within the continuum of Aboriginal culture, history, and community after generations of displacement and disconnection.

For Tilly, reconnecting with her Nyoongar heritage involves embracing cultural practices, language, and traditions that had been marginalized under colonial influence. These elements of culture—once forcefully suppressed—serve as vital components of identity and community, helping Tilly and others to reconstruct a sense of self that is rooted in their Indigenous ancestry. Scott emphasizes that this reconnection is not just a return to the past but an act of reclaiming agency in the present, a means for characters to affirm their resilience in the face of historical trauma. Krishna Sen emphasizes,

Language, in particular, emerges as a powerful tool for reclaiming identity in *Taboo*. The revival of Nyoongar language serves as a way for characters to bridge generational gaps and reinforce community bonds. Language, as Scott illustrates, carries the weight of collective memory and ancestral knowledge;

it offers a direct line to cultural continuity that is both healing and empowering. (Sen 46)

Furthermore, Scott shows how traditions and rituals foster resilience by providing characters with a framework of belonging and purpose. Participation in cultural ceremonies, storytelling, and collective gatherings gives characters like Tilly a renewed sense of identity grounded in the strength and wisdom of their ancestors. These practices not only offer comfort but also function as acts of resistance, asserting the endurance of Aboriginal identity despite the historical attempts to erase it.

In *Taboo*, cultural reconnection thus becomes a means of reasserting identity in a world that has often denied its legitimacy. By depicting characters' journeys back to their roots, Scott underscores the role of cultural practices in cultivating resilience, fostering a sense of belonging, and ultimately healing the wounds inflicted by colonialism (Sen 47). This journey of cultural rediscovery becomes transformative for Tilly and others, solidifying their place within their heritage and imbuing them with the strength to confront the challenges of the present.

Conclusion: *Taboo* and the Future of Aboriginal Storytelling

Kim Scott's *Taboo* stands as a powerful contribution to Indigenous literature, foregrounding themes of identity, cultural reconnection, and resilience. Through the novel, Scott confronts the complex legacy of colonialism, exploring how historical trauma and the dispossession of land have deeply impacted the lives and identities of Aboriginal communities. By tracing the journey of characters like Tilly as they reconnect with their heritage, Scott emphasizes the enduring importance of cultural practices, ancestral ties, and language in rebuilding and affirming Aboriginal identity.

Scott's work not only enriches the landscape of Indigenous literature but also offers a model for reclaiming narratives within Aboriginal storytelling. *Taboo* reflects the resilience of Aboriginal culture through the lens of a contemporary story rooted in both historical and personal dimensions of Indigenous experience. This novel, while deeply personal to the Nyoongar people, resonates with Indigenous communities globally who seek pathways to cultural revival and self-determination (Cowlshaw npg.).

As a work of fiction that draws on the lived experiences, struggles, and hopes of Aboriginal Australians, *Taboo* remains profoundly relevant. It speaks to the ongoing fight for cultural resilience in the face of a colonial past and its lingering effects on identity. Scott's narrative ultimately reaffirms the power of Indigenous storytelling to heal, restore, and envision a future grounded in respect for ancestral knowledge. For Indigenous literature, *Taboo* serves as a testament to the strength of Aboriginal communities and their commitment to preserving and evolving their cultural legacy.

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