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**The Dance of Survival: Poetic Protest, Tragic Irony, and the Noongar  
Legacy in “*That Deadman Dance*”**

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**Abstract**

The study investigates Kim Scott's evocative novel as a layered narrative addressing historical displacement and ongoing Indigenous realities. Set in early 19th-century Western Australia, the narrative traces Bobby Wabalanginy, a spirited Noongar youth whose experiences reflect the broader consequences of cultural interaction, initial cooperation, and eventual colonization. This study analyzes how the novel operates as a lyrical defiance against dominant colonial narratives that portray Aboriginal cultures as fading or static. Scott constructs a textual space where Indigenous voices reassert identity and resilience, in particular Noongar oral customs, narrative rhythms, and fused linguistic textures. The dance is the medium of reimagined communication that challenges erasure and revives historical self-expression. The study also debates the illegal approaches of land sovereignty, cultural restitution, intergenerational healing, and Indigenous education in the Albany region, Western Australia. Bobby's arc parallels current realities experienced by Aboriginal communities fighting for visibility, equitable literacy resources, and the protection of ancestral languages. Scott delivers the accuracy of Aboriginal representations in literature and the role of literacy in empowering Indigenous youth. Scott showcases his literary sense in storytelling and advocating for Indigenous learning until today; his works decode the past relationship between the Noongar people and British colonisers. This complete study of *Deadman Dance* offers the retelling of unforgettable colonial history, territorial collapse, adaptability, and cultural perseverance in his Australian writings. The study concludes with a comparative analysis of the present mentality of natives and immigrants all over the nation regarding a sustainable environment.

**Keywords:** Decolonization, Eco-narrative, Historical trauma, Resilience, Identity politics

## **Introduction**

In *That Deadman Dance*, Kim Scott crafts a haunting history of colonial encounter in early 19th-century Western Australia and reshapes the relevant identifications of cultural survival, poetic protest, and tragic irony, along with contemporary resonance, including several perspectives. Most importantly, Noongar people's enduring spirit foregrounds their centrality in the historical and cultural narrative of the land through the highly noticed literary evidence. The heart of storytelling in this novel decodes the colonizers and Indigenous Australians and their dark sides through the eyes of Bobby Wabalanginy, a young Noongar man. This shift in consciousness carries the narration along an emotional and political arc. Scott is recognized as a prolific writer because of his working ethic of adding realistic evidence; in this case, realism in Australian literature serves as a mirror, reflecting national concerns, ethical questions, and cultural complexities. It empowers writers to capture authentic lived experience, making their work relatable, relevant, and socially resonant.

## **Research Design or Experiment**

### **2.1 Poetic Protest and Language as Survival**

Kim Scott's narration echoes the poetic elements embedded in their songs, chants, and oral stories; that is considered a form of systemic silencing, oppression, and colonisation at every step. His literary and comparative studies have been widely explored in postcolonial, Indigenous, and feminist literary discourses; it further recalls what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who famously once questioned "Can the subaltern speak?", emphasised about how language and representation can be reclaimed by marginalised voices. It is believed that language is a tool of both colonisation and liberation—when reclaimed; it becomes an act of cultural survival, identity and resistance. Kim Scott draws upon this tradition of poetic protest by privileging Noongar oral traditions, storytelling, and performative acts of language. Bobby Wabalanginy, dances and sings not merely for entertainment but as acts of cultural assertion and remembrance: "Bobby sang and danced as his ancestors had. He did it for the white men, yes, but more than that, he did it for the land, the ancestors, and himself."(Scott 53). Here, poetic protest is not overt or militant but encoded within their reaction and core components of Indigenous epistemology; Scott's use of both English and Noongar language within a hybrid narrative structure mirrors

what theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha would call 'cultural hybridity', wherein colonized subjects use language and cultural forms to subvert colonial authority from within. Thus, language becomes more than communication—it becomes memory, defiance, and survival for Aboriginal Australians. It is deeply tied to the Dreaming (or Tjukurpa), which encompasses the spiritual, ecological, and social laws passed down through generations. *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples* decodes that,

The term 'indigenous' is problematic; it appears to collectivize many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different. Other collective terms also in use refer to 'First Peoples', or 'Native Peoples', 'First Nations' or 'People of the land', 'Aboriginals', or 'Fourth World Peoples'(Smith 6).

In Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*, the use of Noongar language alongside English symbolizes a hybrid identity, resisting colonial assimilation. Scott's characters use song, performance, and storytelling to keep the language alive, making it a form of survival and resistance. Language becomes a living archive of Aboriginal worldviews, linking people to the land and ancestors. In addition to language, Aboriginal art and body markings—such as paintings and tattoos—are profound cultural texts. Aboriginal paintings, especially in dot art and sand drawings, are not merely decorative; they are visual maps of Country, ancestral journeys, and sacred sites. Each symbol in Aboriginal art is layered with meaning and often understood only within the community. The non-verbal system of storytelling, such as Tattoos and body painting, traditionally done with ochre or scarification, serve both ceremonial and identity functions. They are markers of kinship ties, totems, initiation status, and ancestral connection. In ceremonies, painted bodies become living canvases, expressing spiritual and social belonging. These body designs are ephemeral yet powerful—they assert identity in the moment and reconnect individuals with Dreaming narratives.

### **2.1.2 Tragic Irony and Cultural memory**

Tragic irony is a specific type of dramatic irony commonly found in tragedies; it is usually something that will lead to the character's downfall or suffering. A powerful strand of tragic irony runs through *That deadman dance*, particularly in Bobby's idealistic belief in coexistence. He envisions a world where Noongar and European settlers can live in harmony; his faith in this vision becomes a source of

tragedy as settlers gradually impose colonial violence, cultural erasure, including land dispossession.

The narration states that “But there was none of that. Bobby was only imagining, only writing. Held in the sky on a rocky headland, Bobby drew chalk circles on slate, drew bubbles. Bubelz. Roze a wail. He erased the marks with the heel of his hand. It wasn't true, it was just an old story, and he couldn't even remember the proper song”. (Scott 3)

Bobby imagines a mythical, poetic journey—diving into the whale's body, singing the ancestral song, merging with tradition and nature, that creates a painful contrast between Bobby's hope and imagination and the historical reality of cultural loss, which the reader is acutely aware of. The whale-dream passage with Bobby is the most powerful example of tragic irony. His deep longing to connect with cultural memory and spirit is undone by his cultural disconnection, which we as readers recognize as a tragic consequence of colonial disruption—a dream of revival within a context of irreversible loss.

Here, Scott exposes the colonial double standard; the settlers' temporary fascination with Noongar culture is conditional, exploitative, and ultimately destructive that is marked by this irony: the more he attempts to build bridges, the more he is marginalized.

The term cultural memory was popularized by Jan Assmann, a German Egyptologist and cultural theorist, in the 1990s; it is considered that the way societies remember their past through cultural expression, rituals, and symbolic systems that last beyond living memory. In literary and postcolonial studies, this concept has since been applied to examine how collective identities are preserved, reshaped, or silenced, especially among historically marginalized groups.

Cultural memory, in Aboriginal Australian contexts, is not simply a recollection of the past—it is a living, embodied connection between people, Country, and ancestral knowledge. It is deeply rooted in oral storytelling, ceremonial practices, songlines, and the land itself. For Aboriginal people, the land is not a backdrop to history; it is the archive. As Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson explains, “Our ontologies, our ways of being Indigenous are inextricably connected to being in and of our lands and land in the colonizer's terms, but rather a grounded connection to and care for land” (Nabulsi 24-42). This is true that the land is our memory, our history, our being; this worldview situates memory as relational, carried through generations not by books, but by bodies, songs, and performance.

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### **2.1.3 Contemporary Resonance**

Scott’s novel is not simply historical fiction; it speaks to contemporary Indigenous struggles for land rights, language revival, and recognition. In a time where Australia continues to grapple with the legacy of colonization and the path toward reconciliation, *That deadman dance* is a call to remember, not as nostalgia, but as a commitment to justice and truth. The article “Shadow Indigenous Minister Jacinta Nampijinpa Price fronts up to protests by Noongar people in Bunbury” echoes that,

Dozens of people have gathered to protest the arrival of Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians Jacinta Nampijinpa Price in Western Australia's South West. Liberal candidate running for the federal seat of Forrest, Ben Small, promoted the Bunbury event on social media earlier this week. His post called on locals to come have a conversation about the failed Voice to Parliament referendum, Albanese government waste, and the Liberals' plan to get "Australia back on track (“ABC NEWS”).

Many contemporary articles discuss the stories that highlight two important dynamics: ongoing governance and sovereignty discussions within Noongar institutions, and sustained commitment to cultural education and political agency. The article “Noongar Boodja turns four” mentioned that “The Noongar Boodja Six Seasons program recently celebrated its fourth year at Kings Park, engaging over

4,000 students in cultural activities—including art, dance, storytelling, and understanding of Noongar seasonal knowledge” (“Noongar Boodja”).

### **Results and Discussion**

Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* transforms colonial history into a narrative of resilience and cultural survival. Through the use of Noongar oral traditions, hybrid language, and performance, the novel acts as a poetic protest against colonial silencing. The character of Bobby Wabalanginy embodies both cultural pride and tragic irony, as his vision of coexistence ultimately collapses under the weight of dispossession and erasure. At the same time, cultural memory—rooted in land, ceremony, and storytelling—emerges as a living archive of Aboriginal identity. The novel also resonates with contemporary Noongar struggles for language revival, education, and sovereignty, demonstrating how literature functions as both testimony and protest, affirming the endurance of Indigenous identity and its continuing relevance in present debates on reconciliation and justice.

### **Conclusion**

Kim Scott's *That deadman dance* is a poetic testimony of tragedy with resilience, and memory with narrative in every stage. Scott invites readers to think outside the textual narration, because people are still connected to their roots. Kim Scott's foundational text in contemporary Aboriginal literary studies offers a nuanced portrayal of Indigenous identity, colonial contact, and cultural memory. Scott belongs to the Noongar heritage, from the south-west of Western Australia, and his writing reflects a deep commitment to represent his ancestral culture with the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project and skillfully blends English with Noongar phrases, illustrating how language functions as both cultural memory and resistance.

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