

Polyphonic Intersections and Narrative Resistance: A Bakhtinian Reading of Kim Scott's *Benang*

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Abstract

In an era of growing scholarly engagement with decolonial methodologies, the exploration of narrative form as a site of resistance is especially significant. Kim Scott's *Benang*, a groundbreaking work of Aboriginal Australian literature, offers a compelling case for such inquiry. The novel challenges colonial historiography and explores indigenous identity through an intricately layered narrative. This paper examines *Benang* through the theoretical lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of Polyphony, which posits the coexistence of multiple, independent voices within a single narrative. By applying Bakhtinian dialogism, the study investigates how *Benang* gives form to diverse epistemologies including Indigenous oral traditions, colonial archives, ancestral memory and personal trauma, without subsuming them under a single authoritative voice. The novel's fragmented structure and narrative heteroglossia are analysed as intentional literary strategies that disrupt linear history and reflect the cultural ruptures experienced by aboriginal communities.

The research employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology, drawing from postcolonial theory and trauma studies to deepen the analysis of narrative voice and resistance. The findings suggest that Scott's use of polyphony is not only an aesthetic innovation but also a political intervention that enables cultural survival and narrative sovereignty. By amplifying historically marginalized voices, *Benang* transforms the novel into a dialogic space of ethical storytelling. This study contributes to emerging conversations on literary decolonization and affirms polyphony as a vital mode for representing contested histories and complex identities. It also underscores the broader relevance of Bakhtin's theory within postcolonial frameworks, particularly in articulating trauma, memory and identity in settler-colonial contexts.

Keywords: Kim Scott, *Benang*, Polyphony, Bakhtin, Postcolonial Narrative, Trauma Studies.

Introduction

Polyphony is a literary technique that enables the author to interweave multiple voices, each offering a distinct perspective and narrative. This approach allows for an exploration of diverse themes and issues by incorporating a range of characters and their viewpoints. By presenting diverse voices authors can offer a more complete and nuanced view of complex topics as the characters' experiences and perspectives may differ greatly.

This technique, derived from the term used in music to describe multiple independent melodies interweaving harmoniously, is employed to create a rich, complex narrative texture. In a polyphonic literary work, each character or narrative voice maintains its own unique viewpoint and often has an equal presence in the story, contributing to a multifaceted exploration of themes, events, and issues. This approach contrasts with a univocal narrative, where a single, dominant perspective guides the reader through the story. Polyphony allows for the representation of diverse and sometimes conflicting viewpoints, enhancing the depth and realism of the narrative. It is particularly useful in exploring complex social, cultural, or political themes, as it mirrors the multiplicity of voices and experiences in real life.

The concept of polyphony in literature was significantly developed by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who used it to describe the narrative structure of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels. Bakhtin argued that Dostoevsky's works were characterized by a plurality

of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, creating a dialogue among them rather than subsuming them into a single, unified narrative perspective. In summary, polyphony in literature is a narrative technique that incorporates multiple, independent voices, each contributing its own perspective to create a layered and multifaceted narrative.

Polyphony in literature can be found in various works where authors use multiple voices or perspectives to enrich their narratives. Some notable examples of Polyphonic texts are Fyodor Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov", where Dostoevsky presents the distinct voices and perspectives of each of the Karamazov brothers—Dmitri, Ivan, Alyosha, and their half-brother Smerdyakov. Each brother embodies different philosophical and moral viewpoints, creating a complex narrative that explores themes of faith, doubt, and free will.

William Faulkner's novel "As I Lay Dying" employs multiple first-person narratives, each offering their perspective on the journey to bury Addie Bundren. The narrative shifts between the voices of the Bundren family members and other characters, providing a fragmented and multifaceted view of the events. Another example of a polyphonic text is Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" in which she uses a stream-of-consciousness technique to present the inner thoughts of various characters, weaving together their perspectives over the course of a single day. The narrative moves seamlessly between Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Warren Smith, and others, exploring themes of time, memory, and identity.

Toni Morrison's famous novel "Beloved" incorporates multiple voices to narrate the story of Sethe, a fugitive slave tormented by the ghost of her deceased daughter. The narrative includes the perspectives of Sethe, her daughter Denver, Paul D, and the ghost Beloved, each contributing to the portrayal of trauma and the legacy of slavery. "One Hundred Years of Solitude" written by Gabriel Garcia Marquez also features a large ensemble of characters spanning several generations of the Buendía family, with each character providing a different viewpoint on the family's history. The shifting perspectives and overlapping stories create a rich, layered narrative that reflects the complexity of the family's legacy and the history of the town of Macondo.

Zadie Smith's novel "White Teeth" traces the lives of two families, the Joneses, and the Iqbals, over several decades, incorporating multiple voices and perspectives. The narrative

shifts between characters of different generations and cultural backgrounds, exploring themes of identity, multiculturalism, and generational conflict. Orhan Pamuk's novel "My Name Is Red" is narrated by a diverse range of characters, including a murder victim, a murderer, and even inanimate objects like a coin and a painting. The polyphonic structure allows Pamuk to explore different facets of the story and the philosophical questions about art, love, and religion in the context of the Ottoman Empire. These examples illustrate how polyphony allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced exploration of themes and characters, giving readers a deeper insight into the narrative's complexities.

The present study aims to analyse Kim Scott's novel *Benang* as a polyphonic text, focusing on the presence of diverse voices and perspectives, and examining how this narrative technique contributes to the exploration of complex themes such as identity, colonialism, and Indigenous history. Kim Scott is a prominent Australian author of Aboriginal heritage, specifically from the Noongar people of Western Australia. He is celebrated for his contributions to Australian literature, particularly for exploring themes related to Indigenous identity, culture, and history. Scott has won several prestigious awards, including the Miles Franklin Award twice, for his novels *Benang* (1999) and *That Deadman Dance* (2010). His writing often reflects the complex relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, focusing on reconciliation, cultural revival, and the experiences of First Nations peoples. In addition to his literary work, Scott is involved in language revival and education efforts, promoting the preservation and teaching of the Noongar language.

Overview

Benang (1999) by Kim Scott is a powerful novel that explores themes of identity, race, and the legacy of colonialism in Australia. The novel's central protagonist is Harley, a mixed-race child born to a Noongar mother and a white father. The novel captures his inner conflict through his internal monologue, regarding his identity and place within the Noongar community. The story is narrated by Harley, who embarks on a journey to understand his family's history and his place within it. Set against the backdrop of Australia's brutal policies of assimilation, the novel delves into the history of Harley's family, particularly the experiences of his Aboriginal ancestors.

Harley's grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat, plays a central role in the narrative. Ernest is obsessed with the idea of "breeding out the color" in the Indigenous population, reflecting the historical practices of the Australian government to assimilate Aboriginal people through forced breeding programs. As Harley uncovers the stories of his ancestors, the novel portrays the violence and oppression faced by Indigenous Australians under colonial rule. At the same time, it highlights resilience and survival, particularly through the retention of cultural identity and knowledge. Scott employs a fragmented, multi-voiced narrative structure to weave together personal stories, official documents, and oral histories, creating a polyphonic text that reflects the complexity of Indigenous experiences. *Benang* is a profound examination of Australia's colonial past, the trauma of forced assimilation, and the enduring strength of Aboriginal culture and identity.

Harley's perspective is just one among many, and as the story progresses, readers encounter other characters, each offering their own unique perspectives and experiences. The inclusion of multiple narrative voices in *Benang* enables Kim Scott to delve into the complexities of identity. The character's grapple with questions of self-identity, cultural belonging and the interplay between their Noongar heritage and the influence of white settlers. For instance, Harley's struggle with his mixed heritage and the tension between his Noongar and European roots serves as a central theme in the novel. By juxtaposing his perspective with those of others, Scott highlights the diversity of experiences within the Noongar community, emphasizing that indigenous identity is not singular or monolithic but rather encompasses a spectrum of histories, experiences and identities.

Harley serves as a conduit through which Scott navigates the intricate and often fraught terrain of Noongar identity, a journey that is inextricably linked to the broader history of Aboriginal dispossession and displacement in Australia. Through Harley's search for his family's past, the novel delves into the complex web of personal and communal narratives that have been shaped, obscured, and manipulated by the colonial gaze, a process that ultimately reveals the inherent polyphony inherent in the Noongar experience (Scott, 1999). Scott's narrative approach in *Benang* is a masterclass in literary innovation, as he seamlessly blends various modes of storytelling to create a truly unique and immersive reading experience. The novel's structure, which alternates between Harley's first-person accounts, official bureaucratic

documents, and the oral histories passed down by his elders, reflects the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that have shaped the Noongar identity.

A key aspect of polyphony in *Benang* is the use of various narrative voices. The novel presents a wide array of characters, each with a distinct voice, and it seamlessly shifting between these perspectives throughout the story. This technique enables readers to acquire a deeper understanding of the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of different characters, offering a more holistic view of the Noongar community's history and identity. Through the use of polyphony, Scott emphasizes varied experiences within the Noongar community, highlighting that Indigenous identity is not singular or uniform but rather a broad spectrum of diverse perspectives and lived realities.

This polyphonic nature is further reinforced by the novel's innovative narrative structure, which seamlessly blends official records, personal accounts, and imaginative re-tellings, creating a multifaceted and often disorienting reading experience (Whitlock & Osborne, 2016). Scott's masterful command of language and genre-bending techniques serve to subvert the traditional hierarchies of knowledge, empowering the marginalized voices that have long been silenced or distorted by dominant colonial discourses. Moreover, the novel's exploration of Noongar identity is inextricably linked to the profound and often painful connection to the land, a connection that is equally central to the novel's polyphonic nature (Jiang & Yongchun, 2022). Through the interplay of Harley's personal journey and the collective history of the Noongar people, *Benang* challenges readers to grapple with the complexities of identity, belonging, and the lasting legacies of colonial oppression.

For instance, Harley narrates his journey of self-discovery, interweaving his voice with the voices of his ancestors. This blend of past and present perspectives creates a layered narrative. Harley often reflects on his grandfather's and father's experiences, bringing in their stories and viewpoints, "I can still hear Ern's voice: 'You won't find any shame in our story, son.' But how to tell it? How to make a narrative of something that has left me shattered, without words?" (Scott, 1999, p. 45).

Thematic Depth through Polyphony

The polyphonic structure allows for a nuanced exploration of identity. Harley's journey to understand his heritage and identity is complex and is influenced by multiple voices and perspectives that reflect the mixed and often conflicting aspects of his background. Harley's internal dialogue reveals his struggle with his mixed heritage, the pressure to assimilate, and the desire to honour his Noongar roots. By presenting both Indigenous and colonial perspectives, Scott critiques the historical narratives that have marginalized Indigenous voices. The polyphonic structure emphasizes the resistance and resilience of the Noongar people against the erasure of their culture and history. The inclusion of colonial reports and documents within the narrative serves to highlight their inadequacies and biases, while the personal stories offer a more authentic and humanized account of history. The multiplicity of voices in *Benang* underscores the theme of cultural survival. Despite the oppressive forces of colonization, the continuity of the Noongar voices and traditions throughout the narrative demonstrates their enduring strength and vitality. The stories of different generations illustrate how cultural knowledge and traditions are passed down and adapted, ensuring their survival.

The novel incorporates historical documents, official records, and colonial reports. These voices contrast sharply with the personal and cultural narratives of Harley and his family, providing a critique of the colonial discourse and its attempts to erase or control Indigenous identities. By including colonial documents, Scott exposes the dehumanizing language and policies of the colonizers, juxtaposing them with the rich, personal stories of the Noongar people. Some of the official documents used by Kim Scott are reports by the Protector of Aborigines, which reflect the colonial government's attitudes and policies towards Indigenous people. This excerpt highlights the paternalistic and assimilationist policies of the colonial administration, which sought to erase Indigenous identities.

"The half-caste problem is increasing. Measures must be taken to absorb these people into the general population." (Scott, 1999, p. 101).

Official correspondence between government officials is included in the novel to illustrate the bureaucratic and impersonal nature of colonial rule. This statement underscores the systematic efforts to separate Indigenous children from their families, a practice that led to the Stolen Generations.

"It is essential that the native population be controlled and directed. The removal of mixed-blood children from their families is a necessary step in their education and assimilation." (Scott, 1999, p. 115).

The novel also features accounts from missionaries, who played a significant role in the colonization process by attempting to convert Indigenous people to Christianity. This passage reflects the ethnocentric view of missionaries who saw Indigenous cultures as inferior and in need of salvation through Western religion.

"The natives must be taught the ways of civilization and Christianity. It is our duty to bring them out of their primitive state and into the light of the Lord." (Scott, 1999, p. 150).

Anthropological descriptions of Indigenous people and their cultures are used to show how they were objectified and studied from a colonial perspective. Such descriptions dehumanize Indigenous people by reducing their rich cultures to simplistic and condescending stereotypes

"The Aboriginal tribes of this region are characterized by their nomadic lifestyle and lack of permanent structures. Their social organization is rudimentary, based on kinship and clan affiliations." (Scott, 1999, p. 175).

The novel also features Indigenous languages and songs, which represent the voices of the Noongar people. These elements are crucial in depicting the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the characters' lives, further adding to the multiplicity of voices. The inclusion of Noongar language and songs enriches the narrative and underscores the importance of cultural heritage. These elements are woven seamlessly into the text, reinforcing the connection between the characters and their land, culture, and ancestors. The use of Noongar songs and phrases within the narrative serves to preserve and celebrate the language and culture, asserting its place within the broader Australian context.

"And I remember the old people singing, voices rising and falling like the wind. 'Ngan koort boodja, ngan koort boodja,' they sang. 'My heart, my land.'" (Scott, 1999, p. 178).

The stories of multiple generations of Harley's family are told, each adding their own voice to the narrative. These intergenerational stories highlight the impact of colonization over time and show the resilience of the Noongar people.

"Grandfather Sandy's tales of the old days, before the white men came, were filled with magic and mystery. Father's stories, though, were filled with pain and struggle, fighting to hold onto what little remained of our culture." (Scott, 1999, p. 223).

Harley's internal dialogue contributes to the polyphonic texture of the novel. His struggles with identity and belonging are expressed through a multitude of conflicting thoughts and emotions. This excerpt highlights the paternalistic and assimilationist policies of the colonial administration, which sought to erase Indigenous identities.

"Who am I, really? A product of mixed blood, torn between two worlds? I hear my grandfather's voice urging me to embrace my heritage, but I also hear the voice of my father, warning me of the dangers of looking back." (Scott, 1999, p. 310).

Analysis of Historical and Official Voices

By incorporating these historical and official voices, Scott critiques the colonial attitudes that sought to dominate and control Indigenous populations. These voices reveal the dehumanizing and paternalistic views held by colonial authorities, which justified their oppressive policies. The juxtaposition of official voices with personal narratives highlights the stark contrast between the lived experiences of Indigenous people and the detached, bureaucratic language of colonial documents. This contrast emphasizes the disconnect between the colonizers' perceptions and the reality of Indigenous lives. Including actual historical and official documents adds authenticity to the novel, grounding the fictional narrative in real historical contexts. This approach helps readers understand the systemic nature of colonization and its lasting impact on Indigenous communities. The presence of these official voices allows readers to see the full extent of the colonial project and its harmful effects. By contrasting these voices with the rich, personal stories of Harley and his family, Scott fosters empathy and understanding for the resilience and strength of the Noongar people.

Conclusion

Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* is a masterful illustration of a polyphonic text, where the interplay of multiple voices and perspectives creates a rich, multifaceted narrative. This narrative structure not only enhances the thematic depth of the novel but also serves as a powerful tool for deconstructing colonial histories and celebrating the resilience of Indigenous cultures. Through its polyphony, *Benang* offers a profound meditation on identity, history, and cultural survival, making it a significant work in contemporary Australian literature.

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