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Resisting Deracination, Reviving Identity: Re-reading Kim Scott's *True Country*

Arindam Das

Heritage Institute of Technology, Kolkata

Abstract

Aboriginal Australian author Kim Scott's *True Country* first novel, reveals the author's grappling with his Aboriginal identity amidst a community that has been deracinated, impoverished of its culture, thriving on reciprocity demanding welfare system and subjected to abominating ghettoization. The obvious reason being the corrosive assimilative workings of the white Australian nation-state. Driven by the zeal to unearth the spiritual truth/identity about this community and his self, Billy—the narrator sets out for a rummaging and recovers the meaning of true Aboriginal identity both at individual and community level. At the same time, as identity is internally heterogeneous, slippery, unstable and situational, true Aboriginal identity reclaiming remains a matter of strategic and subversive cultural resistance. While resisting white deracinating practices, the author discovers a 'true country'—a true Aboriginal identity—that could be realized beyond the modern truths in the world of 'Dreamtime reality'. It is this strategized cultural resistance to the assimilative white Australian nation-state, as is evident in the invective writing style of Scott, which I will highlight in this paper.

[Keywords: Kim Scott, *True Country*; deracination, Identity, aboriginal, Australia]

The bitter truth is that in a racist society where a brown skin (along with other colors) can cost lives, people will embrace any ideology that seems to offer the hope of change. Even when that ideology proves counter-productive, the hope persists...[N]ationalism, then, has to be seen as a complicated, two edged sword. It can't be fully understood if we just dismiss it as 'identity politics.' (Elizabeth Martínez *De Colores Means All of Us*, as qtd. in Moya and García 1)

True Country (1993), the Australian Aboriginal (Noongar) author Kim Scott's first novel, reveals the author's grappling with his Aboriginal identity amidst a community (Karnama) that has been deracinated, impoverished of its culture, thriving on reciprocity demanding welfare system and subjected to abominating ghettoization. The author, Billy, finds himself in an abject state in which Karnama community, especially its young generation, has failed to hold on to its traditional values and myths and is more inclined towards the ill-begetting mores of modern white life-style. Further Billy's (the narrator of the novel) Anglo-Celtic bringing up questions his own Aboriginal essences within. The obvious reason behind both is the corrosive assimilative workings of the white Australian nation-state. Driven by the zeal to unearth the spiritual truth/identity about this community and his self, Billy sets out for a rummaging. Out of the squalor—both social and cultural—Billy recovers the meaning of true Aboriginal identity both at individual and community level. In this process of recovering an Aboriginal identity he is joined by a number of members of the Karnama community who orally narrate their stories and thereby culturally subverts the white nation-state and its colonialist/modernist policies and projects. At the same time, as identity is internally heterogeneous, slippery, unstable and situational, true Aboriginal identity reclaiming remains a matter of strategic and subversive cultural resistance. If storytelling, an alternative narrative, itself is a common public culture with the Aborigines, which recollect memories and fashions it out of myth, then the same identity building technique has been strategized consciously by Scott to act as a tool of subversion. Not only Scott appropriates the Eurocentric canonical standards of written narratives and

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standardized language structure, but also mixes magic realist style with 'Dreamtime' spirituality. These stories help fill in the gaps and fissures of documented history of the White missionaries and revive the impoverished culture of the community. While resisting such deracinating practices, the author discovers a 'true country'—a true Aboriginal identity—that could be realized beyond the modern truths in the world of "Maban reality"¹. It is this strategized cultural resistance to the assimilative white Australian nation-state, as is evident in the invective writing style of Scott, which I will highlight in this paper.

Scott's prime narrator Billy decides to begin his story from "no world to belong to and belong to you" to "a special place for us alone" (13, 14). In search of recovering this special place Billy conjures up an imaginary Aboriginal land/community in the far north of Western Australia:

And it is a beautiful place, this place. Call it our country, our country all round here. We got river, we got sea. Got creek, rock, hill, waterfall. We got bush tucker: apple, potato, sugarbag, bush turkey, kangaroo, barramundi, dugong, turtle...every kind. Sweet mangoes and coconuts too.

There is a store, school for our kids and that mission here still. That's all right. Yes, you might never see a better place. Our home.

When it's rainy season rivers fill up and flood and surround us. Is like we are a *forgotten people* then, on a maybe *shrinking island*; a special place for us alone. (self emphasis, 14)

Yet, if dream and hope persists then apprehension, as evident in the last two paragraphs of the aforementioned extract, too looms large. The assimilative White missionary activities have made the Aboriginal masses oblivious of their culture and devoid of their own land. Further the 'modern' white mores and manners unwittingly incorporated in the Aboriginal lifestyle have distraught the life of the Karnama people and made it bereft of conviction and integrity:

People not believing, people not trusting, people not caring. All failing down, all asking to fall down. That's all we need to say for now.

...The man is empty and has nothing inside him, except when he drinks from a bottle or spurts into a woman or has money in his hand. A *modern man* may be. (emphasis added, 148)

True Country gives a general overview of the conditions of the Aborigines in various missions or reserves due to the colonization and assimilationist policies of the White Australian nation-state. This disintegrated and dislocated Karnama world thrives on government handouts, suffers from alcoholism; there is scarcity of job and food, and it indulges in wife-beating, licentiousness and petrol-sniffing. Such desperate condition resulted from the burden of colonial rule. Such pan-Aboriginal disintegration reminds what Kevin Gilbert notes about the experience of Aboriginal people— "rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues to the present day" (3). Such violation of Aboriginal culture through forceful assimilation is recollected in the stories of Fatima's (an 'Elder'-woman of Karnama) childhood days.

Fatima Nangimara of *True Country* introduces herself as "the first one born in the mission". It is from this very self introduction and the following detailing about her early life that the assimilative colonial tendencies and its systematic and institutionalized "Enlightenment" policies become quite obvious. Fatima talks about an institutionalized education system—the missionary schools—which for the modernist nationalism thinker Ernest Gellner (*Nations and Nationalisms*) was an indispensable nationalist idea generating state apparatus. The white nation in its transition towards capitalism and a subsequent desire to create a skilled labour force opened up loyalty generating machinery called community schools to train a group that could fit into the white 'imagined community' (Benedict Anderson):

'I grow up in the mission. I grow up by the Spanish monks, you know the Fathers.

'When I was bigger they sent me to school because there's no school in here... 'Myself and Mary we went to Beagle Bay school by *Kuringa*, by big ship.

'They didn't tell us nothing, they hide the clothing. They pack it up, gave it to one of the Fathers, and tell us that we were just going to see the people on that boat, *Kuringa*.

'But it wasn't true. They play tricks on us. We might cry, or my mother might take to the bush and hide me, see. So they didn't tell anybody. (*True* 30)

This recollection is obviously of a member of the stolen generation who was removed from her family by Australian government agencies, church missions and welfare officers. This forceful removal was originally considered as child welfare by the standards of colonial policies, however the practice is today perceived by many as gross human rights violation, having wrought extensive familial, psycho-somatic and cultural damage. The psychological and cultural devastation caused by such practices of the white nation-state, and even the scar that remained indelible on their family life is also brought out by the reminiscences of Fatima. Although Fatima acknowledges that the treatment meted out to her and her sister in the ship was good, yet she nostalgically recollects:

"We were thinking of Mummy and Daddy and sad because I didn't say 'bye to Daddy because Daddy was fishing. And Mummy was at home. So....We were only crying for Mummy and Daddy, still crying" (Scott 31).

Unlike many Aboriginal children who were sent out for adoption, these two girls, as Fatima recounts, were grown up and returned home after their "education" to the community. Still, the overpowering effects of linguistic colonization made these two girls forget their own language:

'...We didn't know how to speak the language. We forgot about our language. We talk in English. I couldn't understand my mummy. I forgot all about our language. We forgot about it...

'My mummy said that she cannot understand, to other people. Telling them that we cannot understand them and that they cannot talk, when they were talking to us in language. Mummy told them, "They don't talk, they forgot about their language." (33)

Thereby such returning home was, exactly speaking, not the proper coming home for more than one such reason. Not only were these girls not being able to get themselves accommodated to the community because of their initial shortcoming with their traditional language, but also the Aboriginal Law and customs refrained such grown up girls to stay with their parents, as a result of which Fatima and her sister were taken to the missionary dormitory again:

'Mummy took me to the dormitory where we have to live. I was already a big girl, see, because I couldn't stay with them. In the law of the Aborigine, from the bush, you know, their fathers don't like big girls to live in their mummy's place.

'They don't like me to stay with them. Not like here how they live with their parents.' (33)

The White missionary concocted severe reasons in defense to act as the ward of Aboriginal children by separating them from their 'folks' and their culture, and inculcated modern Eurocentric learning in these Aboriginal kids. In Australia, it is not the Aboriginal children alone but the Indigenous mass in general remained the 'ward of State'. Kamama too became a White-teacher-managed community. If Ernest Gellner talks about the "imposition of high culture of society" by "school-mediated, academy supervised idiom" then such mentoring of Kamama people is seen by the state appointed White teachers from early times (*Nations and Nationalism*

57). Billy reads from a journal entry of a Karnama school principal of 1965 where he documents how an eight year old girl was sexually involved with several old men in the old people's camp and how this "pastime" in action was enjoyed by many children. As a consequence the 'moral guardian' decides:

'I have decided to ban the children from the old camp altogether and with mission help may be able to clean up this mess.

'Those camps are places of disease, filth, and full of uncivilized people. It is obvious for me that for the good of the children's education they must not associate with old people.

'P.S. Mathematical tables appear to be big success. Children do know their tables quite well' (self emphasizes 81)

This lopsided journal entry is definitely monoglossic in nature and remains to be verified by the hitherto undocumented voice of the margins about the truth of such befouled blames. Yet, in the civilized/uncivilized dichotomy what clicks as a successful measure is the teaching of rationality and lower level economics—"mathematical table". The White nation-state acted as a legal guardian of the 'savage' Aborigines and even had a say in their marriage. Fatima was married off to much older Walanguh without her consent. Thereby the most personal aspect of Aboriginal life was determined by the state or state appointed bodies or authorities. She ran off several times but "luckily" Walangu proved to be a good man who was "not angry with me (Fatima) but with missionaries" (Scott 34-5). Fatima at the end of her first narration seems to be disgusted with the present day Karnama people who "But today marry anykind. Mothers, daughter, take them anyway. People are going a bit dogs now." (35) It is this vast cultural disparity between the present condition of the Aborigines in Karnama, which is an outcome of the colonization, and its past heritage that forms the key component for the rest of the novel.

Alcohol and substance abuse remained one of the main problems of the Aboriginal community, as Scott describes about his Karnama:

Billy and Liz were over at the school on Sunday. From there they watched a fight take place among the houses near the school gate. Two women were pushing and sparring at each other like buck kangaroos. A group of men and women jeered and cheered them, and swore and cursed one another. The distance and the window glass meant that the shouts carried thinly to Billy and Liz, and the dominating silence made it strangely theatrical. It was pathetic of course, but also, somewhat brave; to be making an effort of any sort in all this vastness. The stood at the edge of the window, so that they could not be seen watching, and the frame made the scene almost staged. They were intrigued.

Next day at school the senior students were sullen and subdued. One girl wrote this in her journal:

Someone brought grog to Karnama and all the people get drunk and they start having fights with one other that drinking business makes the older people like Fatima Walanguh Sebastian Samson very upset so when all the people are better the next day the old people talk out loud to all the people who was drunk and tell them what they think of them when they were drunk and of course they feel shame. (113)

With a theatrical, sardonically funny and grim humour the entire event of people fighting after getting drunk is narrated by Scott, yet what remains unmistakable is the cause highlighted by a little girl in her school journal entry. She blames the "someone" for having smuggled alcohol into the community. As Billy the narrator highlights it is the White culture of drinking that

has got percolated in this community. In the chapter titled "They Drink" Scott talks about how the White "builders" bring drink and even sell it to the Aboriginal people of Karnama.

Substance abuse such as petrol sniffing as narrated by Scott equally has an immense effect on the community health. Billy narrates the story of Deslie, the young boy who was into the habit of petrol sniffing:

Deslie always had a small can tied around his neck, and petrol in that can. Deslie was better now. But every now and then, no! he dipped a rag in the lawnmower tank maybe. Petrol ate his insides, his brain, everything. Burned the nostrils, moved astringently, forcing into fissures and pushing hollows and enclosures within him that could not be filled. Next day at school, he knew nothing, not even numbers and was quiet...emptiness within him, and his dark glazed eyes reflecting, especially, dark spaces, shadows, the night sky. (Scott 176)

It is not an individual, rather the entire community dying from inside out. Family structure was broken and shattered to the core and even wife-bashing and licentiousness was rampant.

Abject poverty was the by-word of the Aboriginal community's existence and the community thrived on mission handouts and at times even had no food for their children. Not only White missionaries throw out alms, but even in lieu demanded a say and control over their lives and affairs.

Framing the Aboriginals with criminal offense and even physical assaults against them are other issues that are manifest in this novel. Though the first problem is not overtly dealt with by Scott, still the physical attacks on the Aborigines form an important discourse in the text. Vulnerability of the Aborigines to the white modern way of life incurs problems for them. Franny not habituated to drinking or smoking joint tries both. He falls sick and starts vomiting and goes to a car at the car park near the pub and fall into "one soft seat of the car". This enrages the owners of the car:

Those two men stood at the edge of the car park and saw. They didn't shout. They ran over there, angry angry. Angry and wild. They pulled him out of the car, almost like he bounced up from the seat. Oh, he was black! Aborigine! They hit him, kicked him, punched him. He was like a bag, he didn't fight back. Groaned. Maybe they enjoyed feeling their fists and feet striking his flesh. They held him up to hit him. He slid to the ground; maybe yelled, sobbed, whimpered. Pick him up, hit him more. He fell again. Bang! Hit head on the bitumen. One of them killers hit him with a big brick. Oh, yes, they told us later. Oh, they jumped up and down on him. His heart went away. (Scott 203)

The news is widely covered by media and yet the culprits are let off by the court. This shocks the entire Aboriginal community who though accepts the white modern law yet nonetheless wishes for an Aboriginal way of avenging.

A loss of cultural and spiritual identity is evident in the Stella-Beatrice episode of the novel. It is customary in the Karnama Law to "smoke" a growing girl at the funeral of an elder. Beatrice, a fine handsome young girl, though comes to mourn the death of Walanguh is not made by her parents, Raphael and Stella, to walk across the fire from the funeral. Fatima remorsefully says: "People not believing, people not trusting, people not caring. All falling down, all asking to fall down." Fatima dubs Raphael, the bugger father of this girl, "A modern man" (Scott 148). This reminds us of Hobsbawm's secularization tactics of the nation state, where state-promoted nationalism substitutes "cohesive tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 303). This modernity of insouciance towards custom and Laws, that seeks to create a monologic white nation, is heavily cursed by the ancient spirits. Beatrice, a girl with manners most gentle, turns wild and violent. She gets into kicking, punching, screaming, swearing and even stealing in the

grocery store. At other times “she got crazier. Sometimes she just sat down, for a long time, rocking herself, or crying, or with her face vacant and responding to no one.” (Scott 153) The doctors diagnose this to be meningitis. On the other had Stella grow so large with her belly that it seems she is expecting. So both the mother and the daughter are sent to Darwin hospital. Raphael with utmost callousness, on the other hand, moves round in Darwin drinking and getting himself involved in the street brawls. With no improvement in Beatrice’s health she, along with her mother, is shifted to a hospital in Perth. Conditions further deteriorate and this time Beatrice even starts having strange visions:

Most of the time she seemed as if in a trance. Eyes large, rocking rocking herself, and her ears filled with her own sounds. A roaring in her head, torrents of blood rushing like the river at home; eddies and whirlpools of thick blood; blood spilling over bone seeping into sandy flesh.

...

One night she saw the moon tumble across a cloud torn sky. It fell and spilled over two figures lying on the grass far below her. In the morning she saw that sculpture there. (184-85)

With modern doctors unable to restore her to health it is the Elders of the community such as Samson, Fatima and Moses who sing the girl songs to restore her to normal life. They follow “series of rituals” in Perth’s Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital to get her rid of a “tribal curse”. The newspaper reports that clinical psychology thought that in this case “exorcism” is necessary. Even in Stella the “little spirit inside her, it passed away. Finish. People could see.” (186-7)

If the above ritualistic observance is an offshoot of the ‘Dreamtime’ mythical belief of the Aborigines then such similar cultural resistance is also observed in the instances of ‘Corroboree’ performance of the novel. In Scott’s *True Country* no authentic ‘Corroboree’ performances were ever put at display or their profound latent meaning disclosed for the White tourist gaze. “Black Corroboree or White Spectacle” could have been the question that came as an offshoot from the seminal article by Candice Bruce and Anita Callaway that dealt with the representation of corroboree in paintings by White artists; but the uncertainty of positioning the locus of power/knowledge is properly resolved in the resistive acts of the characters who dance the corroboree in *True Country*. The White’s articulation of power through its acts of scopophilia is thoroughly appropriated. The White viewers who invested money and idealistically thought they could have gained knowledge/power by gaining a penetration to the unfathomable mystery of Aboriginal ‘Corroboree’ in reality encounters a failure. Melinda Rose Jewell in her analysis of representation of ‘Corroboree’ in selected Australian novel briefly talks about Scott’s *True Country*:

Indigenous ceremony as ocular commodity is similarly portrayed in Kim Scott’s *True Country* (1993), although in this case it is within the contemporary context of tourism...In this case the spectacle is not the dancers but the ignorance and stupidity of the audience who have lost any colonial authority they once held in their gaze. (46-7)

As has already been shown in the hospital incident an integral element of Aboriginal culture is its firm insistence and unwavering belief in supra-real/spiritual Dreamtime myths. Scott’s use of the same through the characters of Karnama Aborigines most Bhabhaesquely narrates the reality driven scientific modern nation of White modern Australia. Reality, by Eurocentric White standards, had been ever privileged over the para-normal relegating the latter to the level of childish fantasies. ‘Dreamtime’ myths not only form a part of the Aborigine’s ethnic identity or cultural content but also gives meaning to their daily existence where past, present and future converge. The ‘everywhen’ of this spiritual faith gives order to their individual and

communal life. The incorporation of 'Maban' experience overrules the secularist Western narrative. Richard Pascal correctly observes about the use of 'Dreamtime' elements in Scott's *True Country* as the "use of truth beyond ordinary appearance":

Of equal significance are the narrative's (*True Country*) incorporations of Maban experience as counter-weights to its otherwise dutiful adherence to the conventions of secular realism. Scattered throughout the novel are indications that belief in what the West regards dismissively as the 'supernatural' still flourishes in the Aboriginal community, alongside an awareness of the dominant society's skepticism. (n.pg.)

It is in Scott's *True Country* that such magic realism—a poco strategization of 'Dreamtime'—is employed to evoke the feel of a 'true story', a phrase consciously repeated to differentiate the white documented history from the cautiously preserved world views of the Karnama people. Magic realism as used in Scott's *True Country* is not only a cultural belief of the past rather such 'Dreamtime' experience is crucial in understanding the inherent Aboriginal truth about one's own self and the community. In an attempt to sing the land and an Aborigine's identity, as a matter of difference from White Eurocentric nationalist imaginings, the use of paranormality becomes one of the essential strategies of subversion and appropriation. At one point of time in the novel the narrator informs with aplomb about the authenticity of 'Dreamtime' myths:

Old days people could make magic. That's true. That's no story, it's true story.

The old people they had a lot of magic in them.

They even fly in the air. Sometimes like a balloon, a bird, like a snake, even just like themselves. (Scott 68)

Such innate faith in past obliquely indicates a hollow and vacuity of the current scenario of Aboriginal Australia—a land made to be bereft of its roots in spirituality through abhorrent pseudo-modern practices such as drug addiction and deracination. Yet, the main character Billy is initiated to a new sense of Aboriginal identity by not merely venerating the 'true story' of yore but having imbibed the communal Aboriginal identity through a dream experience of a community elder—Walanguh's death:

Billy saw the old man, fat like a balloon, drifting along in the sunlight, way up above the mango trees and coconut palms. [. . .]

Billy stood among all the people of Karnama, all of them silent and in awe [. . .]. Many were transfixed by the shadow, Walanguh's shadow, which, solid black, skimmed and rippled along the ground while the old man, naked and shameless, his penis shrivelled below his swollen belly, grinned and waved at those few who turned their eyes up to him. (Scott 147)

Something that remains unmistakable is that the note struck at this point of time is far from being elegiac, rather it generates a sense of belonging, a communal solidarity—a formulation towards a true country through its true story. The image of flight—a key ingredient of magic realism, variously scattered throughout the story finds its culminating point in the end where Billy had either died through drowning or had a near death experience. Moreover, death in its metaphorical sense also brings in its wake a reincarnation—from mere living to a renewed awareness and knowledge about true existence:

Billy in a blue sky, clouds cobwebbing his vision, sun on his back, the air sharp, the shadow of clouds gliding across the scrubby ground below. [. . .] And he knew who he was, he recognised the land below him. The river snaking across burnt earth sprouting bits of green, that pool in the bend of the river, the green mission ground, the cross of the airstrip . . . (Scott 254-5)

The image of flight, though apparently credited to be that of a modern realist one in an aircraft, is one which 'mimics' the modern technological aspect through its involving of mythic Aboriginal 'Dreamtime' narration. Billy's death and the consequent soaring flight that help him identify with the dead Walanguh symbolizes a doffing away with the brunt of his White identity and attempts in a retelling of a nation from the perspective of the Aboriginal Australians' 'Dreamtime' story. Thus, magic realism used in *True Country* is a strategically planned technique to counter the White power structure at the level of discourse so that it delivers an unsettling shock to the habitual acceptance of canonical Western standards, whether of the genre or of the principle of nation building.

Talking about the entire process of writing in *True Country*, it closely follows the oral narrative technique of Aboriginal story telling style in English which by all standards is Aboriginal in its form. Moreover, the polyphony of narrative voices produces a Bakhtinian decentralization of Western monopolistic narrative. Story telling defines the boundary of an Aboriginal nation and strategizing it, through documentation or recording, fills the fissures or manqué of lopsided modern Western historical documentation and thereby redeems it from any essentialized condition. Furthermore, the recording and documentation of these oral narratives are true appropriations of modern technological and print culture. Scott through these methods in *True Country* not merely inform the White documented past but even analyses the present deracinated Aboriginal condition. Similarly the ingrained liminality of Aboriginal English further helps to locate a Karnama identity. The use of Aboriginal English is meant to put up a resistance to the canonical code of Standard English or what Fredrick Jameson would call 'master narratives'. The polyphonic diversity in *True Country* not merely corroborates a communal view that aspires to revive its identity from various vantage points and is even a formal experimentation in itself that challenges the Western ideological monoglossia. Not only the voices of Sebastian, Fatima, Deslie or other anonymous Aboriginal Elders along with that of the primary narrator Billy, add to the polyphonic structure of the novel, but together also contribute to subvert the powerful monoglossic ideology that attempts the creation of an imagined 'modern' community. Together all these strategies help restore the community identity by striking at the root of domination and exploitation of implicit and explicit power structures.

Thus, in the final analysis, Kim Scott's *True Country* culminates with an identity formation where an individual identity is proved to exist amidst the community identity, the finding of one inevitably leading to the finding of another. The chief narrator Billy's rediscovery of self along with that of revival of Karnama nation comes to a culminating point through the *modus operandi* which is a bit strategized, "little bit new" and "little bit special":

See? Now it is done. Now you know. True country. Because just living, just living is going downward lost drifting nowhere, no matter if you be skitter-scatter dancing anykind like mad. We gotta be moving, remembering, singing our place little bit new, little bit special, all the time.

We are serious. We are grinning. Welcome to you. (Scott 255)

Notes:

1. Aboriginal storytelling exemplifies what Mudrooroo terms in *The Indigenous Literature of Australia* as "Maban reality" or "an acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality" (97), a commonplace element that signify not hallucinatory flight of the imagination—an escapist tendency, but a truth beyond the mundane and quotidian appearances.

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Arindam Das has submitted his Ph.D. at Vidyasagar University in Australian Studies (Topic: 'Narrating the Australian nation': Identity Formation through Cultural Resistance in Selected Aboriginal Works of Kim Scott). He has more than 20 published papers in national journals and international anthologies and journals. He has co-edited a book: Colonial Spectre and Beyond: Studies in Indian Writings in English. He was awarded Australian Studies Australia India Council Fellowship in 2010. He was invited to deliver a paper in the 1st world conference in Australian Studies at Monash University, Prato Centre, Italy. He currently teaches in the Dept of Humanities, Heritage Institute of Technology, Kolkata.
