

# **BENANG: ESTABLISHING, MAINTAINING AND SUBVERTING POWER**

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses how Kim Scott's novel *Benang* constructs the sexuality of the grandfather figure obsessed with his two passions: building and eugenics. Perceiving eugenics as a project in which he can combine his passions, he plans to emasculate his son and grandson systematically. Finally, however, the protagonist recognizes his strategies, which leads to his own assumption of power and identity.

**Key words:** Kim Scott, *Benang*, eugenics, sexuality, emasculation

In Kim Scott's novel *Benang: From the Heart* the white grandfather of the black narrator dedicates his whole life to creating the first white man born, that is, he wants to join the popular eugenics project of his day by contributing to it through and within his own family. In order to be successful, it is necessary for him to see himself and his race as the stronger one, as the one that is able to enter the bloodline of the black race and become so dominant that it will finally annihilate black skin color. Thus, he needs to perceive his own sexuality as strong and needs to think about himself as a capable, masculine man, while emphasizing that the other race is weak and emasculated.

In this paper, I will argue that Ern uses his own sexuality in manipulative ways to prove that the Aboriginal race is inferior and his white blood will prevail. In the following, I will first establish that Ern is obsessed with his sexual prowess and also with creating and building structures; he perceives eugenics as a project in which he can combine his two passions; and finally, that in order for his project to be successful, he tries to take away power from other men, especially his son and grandson, by emasculating them. Finally, I will show that the protagonist of the

novel, after recognizing Ern's different strategies that aim to confuse and emasculate him, finds his power and identity.

First of all, Ern could not pursue his relentless plan without being sure about his sexual power; therefore, he asserts it multiple times. Interestingly, he seems to loathe Aboriginal women but finds them especially attractive; yet, he is shameful of this. Even during his first night in Australia, he goes on one of his many sprees that, as Harley suggests, involve alcohol and rape of native women. Ern's first spree leaves him intrigued, but ashamed. He not only blushes "remembering the night of arrival in this country" (Scott, 1999, p. 45), but he even denies it (p. 50, p. 79). Later, his feelings continue to be ambivalent about it. On the one hand, he is excited and cannot help thinking about it: "his thoughts curled back to the memory of his first night off the ship" (p. 79) and "his brief experiences of drunken sprees in *native camps* [emphasis added] had excited him" (p. 98). On the other hand, "He dismissed it; a moment of weakness only. Another aberration" (p. 97).

Also, this spree is probably the first instance in which he feels powerful due to his sexuality. As the narrator suggests, Ern is aggressive and keeps pondering his superiority. He remembers "The dirt on his bare knees, and how she turned her head away as her body took his thrusts" (p. 50), suggesting that not only is the native woman repulsed by Ern, but also that he is violent. Furthermore, it is suggested that this violence gives him power: "How he had spurted his ecstasy on that night. And he had felt so powerful, even as he turned his back and returned to the light" (p. 79). Returning to the "light" implies leaving both the literal and the metaphorical darkness of the camp; however, the metaphorical darkness, that is, the uneducated and unrefined black people who have not been civilized by the British, continues to attract Ern.

Ern's attraction to Aboriginal women and his sexual appetite are evidenced by further descriptions of his sexual escapades that most probably involve rape in each case. The family of Harley's girlfriend says that they hope that the girlfriend's father is not Ern because "The man had a reputation" (p. 435). Also, Tommy, Ern's son and the narrator's father, notices as a child that "Ern liked to hug all the maids, to help them pat the pillows and turn back the blankets" (p. 158). That these "hugs" are forced upon the maids is evidenced by the fact that Ern considers them exchangeable objects: "Every so often, Ern took a maid to the railway station and changed her for another one" (p. 158), just as he does with other maids, the reason for which is, as implied by the narrator, that the maids get pregnant (pp. 390-391). Moreover, Ern even rapes his son's girlfriend: "[Harley's] father found Ern pushing this Ellen forcefully into the mattress" (p. 403). Thus, Ern asserts his sexuality again and again, which enables him to see himself as a powerful man who is

capable of carrying out the project with which his features and blood will ultimately erase those of another race.

Apart from being obsessed with his masculine power, Ern is also preoccupied with building and creating things, including creating a new family line by breeding. The narrator remarks that Ern tries to consciously create a human being: “Whatever the confusions of my genealogy, there seems little doubt that my grandfather intended to be my creator. It was he who, if not indeed forming the idea, applied it as Mr Neville was unable to do” (p. 32). Thus, he wanted to “place himself nearer the top of the ladder” (Slater, 2003, p. 7) with the help of eugenics, the application of which Haig (2009) deems pseudoscience in her analysis titled “Kim Scott’s *Benang*: Pseudoscience and Colonial Australia.” Ern also loves the act of physically constructing buildings. Building stables gives him so much satisfaction that he hardly perceives it as work: “In the short term he didn’t need much else, and he loved this work. Well, it was hardly work. He loved it, loved constructing things. He had always enjoyed the building of something from nothing” (Scott, 1999, p. 58).

The emphasis Ern puts on his masculinity, coupled with his love of creating and building different structures carry over into the way he sees eugenics: in his mind, improving the Aboriginal race is connected to sexuality, and “his discourse reveals itself to be obsessed with the body and his eugenics program acts to sublimate his sexual desires” (Slater, 2001, p. 4). When James Segal, the Travelling Inspector of Aborigines first talks to him about absorption and assimilation,

For some reason, the words aroused Ernest; perhaps because he was still struggling to free himself of certain erotic memories and guilt. Indeed, his erection threatened to intrude into his mental note-making, as if wanting to prove that there was plenty of lead in his pencil. (Scott, 1999, p. 46)

Thus, it is probable that the way Ern relates to eugenics is shaped by his experience of engaging in sexual relations with native women: the pleasure he gets from raping women of the other race overshadows any initial guilt, and he is ready to take part in the project by Australia’s leading white men, contributing to it by utilizing his attraction to native women.

Apart from connecting eugenics to sexuality, Ern also connects it to creation. After getting introduced to the idea that white men could change the genetic make-up of a whole race, he is aroused:

Whatever rationalizations Ern played with, the truth is that his loins were tingling, and – especially when alone in the evenings – he played with

more than computations. He thought of a reversal, of small white streams entering black. He saw fractions sliding up one another, the lower numbers going larger as a single digit skipped from one to the other, always on top. (p. 76)

The above quotation is replete with sexual imagery, and it suggests that after hearing about eugenics, Ern masturbates while contemplating the neat succession of sexual acts that make up a structure and would ultimately lead to the prevalence of the white race. This line of associations testifies to the fact that Ern thinks about eugenics in terms of both action and metaphor: he sees the concrete steps – that is, sex – that are needed to be taken in order for this project to be successful, and he perceives it as a well-built structure, too: he is mesmerized by fractions and digits.

Another example that establishes Ern's perverse interest in eugenics is connected to his grandson's skin color. Harley writes that Ern has "a curiosity about colour, about the remnants of it, the dilution of it" (p. 413). As Slater (2003) writes, "Ern still anxiously monitors Harley for signs that he is Other than white, or what Ern would call regressing" (p. 9). When Harley suffers an accident that almost costs him his life, he has a blue tint in his skin. He remarks that Ern "may have wondered if this blueness of mine was, to use his language, a *throwback* [emphasis added] to an ancestor" (Scott, 1999, p. 413). He notices that it "certainly aroused [Ern's] ... curiosity" (p. 413). The ellipsis signifying hesitation and insinuation in front of the word 'curiosity' suggests that Ern is sexually aroused by the possibility of miscegenation. Thus, sexuality, building a structure, and eugenics are connected in his mind.

Once Ern realizes that by relying on his sexuality he can create the grand structure that will lead to the first white man born, he starts to undermine the sexuality of his descendants in order to assert his own superiority and also that of his race. As Slater (2003) suggests, "sexuality is another site upon which normative values are created to maintain authority" (p. 6). Using this site, Ern regularly rapes his grandson not only in order to satisfy his sexual perversity, but also to thus emasculate him. Ern is afraid that Harley, despite careful breeding and education, is still closer to Aborigines than to whites, and will somehow regress, that is, will not become a real white man. Probably in order to prevent him from growing up to be a sexually active, "normal" white man, Ern dehumanizes and abuses Harley. As Harley writes, "I stared at the wall as he thrust, in his stilted way, trying to get deeper within me, and if that was not violation enough, wanting to remain there even as he shriveled" (Scott, 1999, p. 78). When the boy turns blue due to his

accident and Ern is aroused by it, Harley writes that “While I was ill and listless he investigated me most rigorously” (p. 413).

Similarly, Ern abused his own son as well, with the goal of somehow punishing Tommy for his heterosexual desires and to stunt his development when it comes to becoming an adult male. The moment when Ern notices that Tommy begins to be interested in women, Ern “began his little probings, in just such a lull between maids and wives. The same probings he tried on me, but Ern had softened by then, and had not the steel in him” (p. 391). Furthermore, Ern rapes the girl in whom Tommy is interested both romantically and sexually, as if to prove that he is more of a man than his adolescent son, while also asserting his masculinity just like in the case of countless other women. As Harley writes, “So when my father found Ern pushing this Ellen forcefully into the mattress... Well, they fought. There was anger there. Tommy remembering the ropes on his mother, remembering the many girls and women” (p. 403). Thus, Ern’s attempts at emasculating his male descendants speak to his uncertainty in his own masculinity that he wishes to preserve and does not want to see contested.

The novel features other signs that show that Harley is emasculated, thus emphasizing that being the victim of genetic experimentation is harmful because a person whose ancestry is so complicated and loaded has problems figuring out his place in his family tree. Harley is in an insecure position and cannot decide whether he is a success or a failure, a beginning or an end (p. 10). He keeps pondering whether he is supposed to be black or white, and he does not know what kind of a heritage he can pass on to the next generations. Most importantly, he fears that he will not be able to pass anything on as he is the end of the line, a failure (p. 10).

Harley’s emasculation is brought about not only by his history of sexual abuse and precarious situation caused by his ancestry, but he is also, quite literally, emasculated by an accident. Apart from a short relationship with two Aboriginal girls, he has no other sexual partners (p. 449). His dog suffers an injury while Harley is a child: “The car, or perhaps only the trailer, must have driven across its testicles while it lay sleeping on the sun-warmed road” (p. 412), and this injury is later mirrored in Harley’s own that happens during his teen years: “There was the crash, where I was maimed as our dog had once been” (p. 446). Following the accident, he says he is castrated (p. 449) and does not consider himself a real man. When he spends time with his uncles and his grandfather, he writes that “And then there were the four of us, all men. Sort of” (p. 110). Also, he is frustrated by this injury and does not feel whole: “no matter how much I tried to savour my memories I tasted only bitterness; what has been taken away” (p. 350).

Despite the different layers through which Ern's masculinity is emphasized and Harley's is devalued, Harley possesses enough strength and determination to take control and find his place. He is fully aware of the insidious and pretentious nature of eugenics. He knows that eugenists presume the worst about Aboriginal people, and he sarcastically remarks that they attempt to "raise [the level of debate about natives] from the level of troublesome indigenous fauna, of vermin control, of eradication and slaughter; raise it to the level of animal husbandry" (p. 74). He recognizes the dehumanizing effect of eugenics: he writes that Aboriginal people "were driven to the settlement like animals, really but of course it was not for slaughtering. For training? Yes, perhaps. Certainly it was for breeding, according to the strict principles of animal husbandry" (p. 91). He is aware of his grandfather's plan, and he "identifies the violence imposed upon him by Ern as belonging to the continuance of colonial power relationships" (Slater, 2003, p. 4). Therefore, it is a conscious decision for him to turn against Ern and what he represents.

When Harley chooses to end the white line and to go on as an Aboriginal person, thus defeating Ern's authority, he uses methods that mirror Ern's earlier ones. As Harley puts it, he tries "to sabotage [the] grandfather's social experiment" (Scott, 1999, p. 449) by reminding Ern that "A first white man is not the *beginning* of anything much" (p. 456). Power relations have shifted, and it is now Harley who possesses enough physical strength and tenacity, while Ern is but a shell of his former self. When Ern is the powerful one, he treats Harley's body as a site of colonization: he enters and violates it. Similarly, Harley alters the old Ern's body as a form of revenge when he carves words into Ern's skin:

At one stage, full of frustration and anger at my place in Granddad's story, I wrote END, CRASH, FINISH into his skin. I poured black ink and ash into the wounds, and tended them carefully so that the skin would heal and seal the letters stark and proud. (p. 445)

The words themselves serve as a clear reminder to Ern that his breeding experiment has come to an unsuccessful end. The method with which they are carved and sealed into his skin is also significant because on the one hand, it includes intrusion and alteration, and on the other hand, it involves permanence as well; thus, the words are supposed to enter Ern's body and stay there for a relatively long time, reinforcing Harley's power.

Furthermore, when Harley reinforces his own power in order to subvert Ern's, he associates the carving with images that have sexual undertones. He writes, "Thinking again of his plans, his words, I added the lines of ink. How the dirty tributary joins the great river" (p. 445). The water imagery, or specifically the river

imagery, mirrors the ambitions Ern previously has about slowly changing the course of history. When he is aroused by the thought of eugenics and engaging in sexual relations with black women, he thinks “of a reversal, of small white streams entering black” (p. 76); thus, he wants to design a plan in which white blood slowly enters black one, or, more specifically, when his white semen enters black bodies. By altering Ern’s body, Harley sabotages Ern’s experiment in two ways. He reverses their situation on the physical level, thus, he enters and violates Ern’s body after years of enduring such violation. Also, he subverts the process started by Ern by altering the language used: he refers to a “dirty tributary” that enters the “great river,” with white people being, presumably, the tributary, and Aboriginal people being the great river. Furthermore, he duplicates Ern’s violence that is evident when Ern brutally insists “that black does become white” (Slater, 2001, p. 2).

Harley’s recognition of his own power is also connected to sexuality in a literal sense. His accident makes him unable to procreate, but several years after it, he realizes that he has fathered children before it happened when he discovered “a space in which he can be other than Ern’s project” (Slater, 2003, p. 9). During their reunion, the two sisters who are his only sexual partners “saw I was harmless enough” (Scott, 1999, p. 450), but they introduce him to his children. This encounter fills him with hope and determination. He is intent on creating “something of which both my children and ancestors could be proud” (p. 450), meaning that while being aware of his complicated ancestry, he is also looking into the future. Also, his determination to be a complete individual and to continue his line is evidenced in the following lines: “I have visited gravesides; my father’s, grandfather’s (eventually), Uncle Will’s, Uncle Jack’s … and so many after that. Each, at the time, seemed a full stop. But I have continued on. I continue them on, in various ways” (p. 353). As Slater (2003) puts it, Harley “cannot be reduced to the identity that Ern attempted to impose upon him” and he “creates and recreates an identity” that will help him survive (p. 2).

To sum it up, the central theme of *Benang*, the problematic nature of the then popular eugenics project, is expressed through sexual imagery. The main proponent of this project, the man that wants to apply theory in practice by starting to experiment, is the narrator’s grandfather, Ern, whose personality enables him to believe in the success of such a project. Apart from having certain personality traits that predispose him to believing that he can create the first white man born – such as confidence and passion for creating and building –, he also consciously cultivates other traits in himself – such as arrogance and masculinity – that make him feel invincible because only by doing so can he reach his goals. Thus, apart from utilizing his sexual superiority, Ern also emphasizes what Slater (2001) calls the

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“dichotomy of the moral and cultural superiority of whiteness” (p. 3). Harley, the victim of the experiment, witnesses as Ern’s power is growing and his is diminishing, but gradually he is able to transcend and defy Ern’s expectations by subverting Ern’s process aimed at emasculating him. This story of intrusion and intervention that nevertheless ends with survival and a determination to thrive can be regarded as a metaphor for the fate of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia.

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