

REVISITING THE HISTORY IN KATE GRENVILLE'S NOVELS

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Abstract:

*Kate Grenville views the history of Australia as a continuum of her own ancestors' history, starting in England and reaching the shores of Australia. Her well researched colonial trilogy namely, *The Secret River* (2005), *The Lieutenant* (2008), and *Sarah Thornhill* (2011), tries to give a cultural tag to her country by recapturing the colonial past. It is Grenville's views about the first three generations of white colonizers in Australia. The theme, story, narration and the conversations bring out what that shared colonial (black & white) history means to the contemporary Australians. Her novels portray much more than the cultural clashes. She does not forget to picture the roles played by the ancestral women in these three novels, the case for colour and the forgotten first, bleak confrontation between the aborigines and the white convicted settlers.*

Keywords: History, trilogy, Australia, colonial, colour, women.

Introduction

Kate Grenville recaptures the Australian history in the commoners' tone in her novels - *The Secret River* (2005), *The Lieutenant* (2008) and *Sarah Thornhill* (2011). The reading of her novels does not evoke any grave or solemn feeling that could be perceived as one reads the social history of England. It is not 'his' story, rather 'her' story she weaves here. Though tinged with satire, Kate Grenville does not forget to feature ladies in the fore front in comparison with the gentlemen. She " 'makes history' both by simply living her life, and by (re)making history by writing it" (wikipedia.org/wiki/KG).

The Trilogy

The Secret River (2006), though written about twelve years ago, deals with Australia's colonial past. The first among the colonial trilogy, *The Secret River* explores the first connection between the white settlers and Australia's indigenous people. The novel was inspired by the story of Grenville's own great-great-grandfather, a convict sent to Australia from London in 1806 (Lea, 2006). The first of the trilogy is set in early 19th-century Australia. Written in a poetic language, the novel is based on the original history of one of Grenville's ancestors, Solomon Wiseman (wikipedia.org/wiki/TSR). Originally Wiseman was a boatman in London. Later he was excommunicated to Australia for theft. Grenville takes that story as a means of weaving a bigger theme: the bleak back-mat of colonialism, more especially its impact on Australia's Aborigines. The title comes from the anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner, who wrote about a "secret river of blood flowing through Australia's history": the story of white Australia's relationship with the Aboriginal people (revolv.com/main/index.KG). The novel overtly spells out the case for colour: "With no one but blacks around him, other than his own son, Thornhill saw that their skins were not black, no more than his own was white." (The Secret River, 214)

The Lieutenant (2008) is set thirty years prior to *The Secret River*. Based on the historical notebooks of Lieutenant William Dawes, Grenville tells the story of the friendship between a soldier with the First Fleet and a young Gadigal girl (wikividly.com/wiki/TL/novel). These two novels, viz., *The Lieutenant* and *The Secret River*; together explore something of the complexity of colonizer - colonized,

otherwise speaking, black-white relations in Australia's bleak past. *The Lieutenant* is a novel that traces the colonial history of Australia.

It is a story spun around one of the very earliest cultural encounters of black-white ethnicities in Australia, at the time of first settlement in 1788. Based on a historical source – the Gadigal-language notebooks of Lieutenant William Dawes – the novel tells the story of a unique friendship. While learning the Gadigal language from a young girl, Dawes wrote down word by word, their conversations (smartmass.net/authors/details/KG). Grenville has used these conversational pieces as the springboard for her novel. *The Lieutenant* was written based on the historical happenings, spun around the life of William Dawes. Though a soldier, he had a sense of scholarship. He sailed from England in 1788 in the First Fleet, accompanying the British convicts to Australia, with an aim to set up a colony there.

The novel features how it is possible for two different ethnicities to communicate and reach across, swimming across the currents of their languages and cultures that separate them, and establish business and social relationship that would include courtesy, love and regard. Definitely their upbringing, the cultural mores, the different styles of communication, the body language and the two different languages belonging to two different language families come into interplay. Despite this, the novel sails through without much impediment, never losing its grip on the theme and the story. It is pertinent to note here the novel recaptures the colonial beginnings of modern Australia. The learning takes place from the reverse – starting from a clever, innocent child – Taragan, and reaching the mature, grown-up lieutenant, Daniel Rooke. “He had begun by thinking of Taragan as a resource” (*The Lieutenant*, 226). It is quite metaphorically portraying the leaning that takes place between the colonial master and the colonized subject, from a child to an adult, and from an enslaved race to a ruling class.

Sarah Thornhill (2011) was the sequel to *The Secret River*. It deals with the story of William Thornhill's youngest daughter. It can be read as a stand-alone novel, without reference to *The Secret River* (wikivisually.com/wiki/KG). It tells the story of one of the children of the main character in the earlier book. Sarah Thornhill grows up knowing nothing of the dark secret in her family's past. When she has to confront it, the direction of her life and her thinking undergo a change. It is a story about secrets and lies, and how to deal with a dark legacy from the past. Grenville has said that the book is set in the 19th century, but is as much about the ugly secrets in Australian history that her own generation inherited (ipfs.io/ipfs/.../wiki/KG).

These three books, known popularly as “The Colonial Trilogy”, talk about the first three generations of white settlement in Australia, and what that shared black/white history means for contemporary Australians. The themes of the three books “reach beyond Australia: all are widely read in other countries where colonialism has left a problematic legacy” (wikipedia.org/wiki/KG).

The History is the Story

While there are enough romantic elements in these enthralling novels, they get submerged in a discourse of remorse for atrocities committed against the black aborigines during colonization. In *Sarah Thornhill*, Grenville examines themes of guilt and conscience that are of continuing significance for Australians today. “*Sarah Thornhill* completes a loose trilogy of beguiling explorations of Australian settler history”, which also includes her 2008 novel *The Lieutenant* (theaustralian.com.au/arts/books/...grenville.../story).

Sarah is the daughter of William Thornhill. William is the complex figure at the centre of *The Secret River* who, in the process of establishing his estate in New South Wales, by taking a horrific course of action. In *Sarah Thornhill*, “there are two poignant and delicately rendered love stories; Sarah moves on when the first one flounders. Romantic love, however, is not the point of this novel” (kategrenville.com/ST). As she matures, Sarah confronts the crimes of her father. Born into the colonial situation, Sarah has no hand in its brutalities; nevertheless, she is tormented by conscience. She is as innocent as those who, today, tackle the issue of saying sorry. Her father has built a fortress of privilege,

comfort and respectability, but she finds this legacy shrouded in a shameful past. "Sarah's story is based on apocryphal fragments of Grenville's family lore and scraps of information barely identifiable as documentation" (theaustralian.com.au).

The novel is narrated in simple language. Sarah tells it in a conversational tone. Though she is an illiterate, she understands the undertones of her surroundings on the Hawkesbury River. Sarah tells the story of her growing passion for a young Aborigine, Jack Langland. Sarah innocently believes that her father is noble and altruistic, giving away gifts of food to starving indigenous neighbours and showing his love for Jack (theaustralian.com.au).

Sarah naively imagines a life with her lover. But it is nipped in the bud by her father and stepmother. Tormented at heart, Sarah moves on with her life. She marries a decent, well-bred Irish settler and starts loving him. William Thornhill orders Jack to fetch his orphaned, half-Maori grandchild from New Zealand and bring her to his home. The little girl is renamed Rachel. But Sarah fails to protect Rachel. The novel shifts from Australia to New Zealand. Sarah is called on to make reparation for her father's misdeeds. Leaving her own baby, Sarah undertakes the treacherous voyage to meet Rachel's sorrowful Maori relatives, where she will publicly call herself to account for the child's mistreatment. Without a word of denial, Sarah accepts and confesses. It is an act of expiation and absolution. This denouement makes the novel a remediation for the colonizer's misdeeds in the past. "In her acknowledgments, Grenville notes that history has become a dangerous word for her to utter and emphatically states that this is fiction, not history." (books.google.co.in)

This novel revisits the fascinating, troubling territory of the history wars. "It rows out on to the secret river of contemporary Australian anxiety and navigates a fictional tributary" (books.google.co.in). *Sarah Thornhill* is also the story of the bleak and shady aspects of Australia's past. The secret in Sarah's family is the same hidden truth of the first confrontation between the aborigines and the settlers. The case for colour is far more disturbing here than it is found in *The Secret River*: "Don't care if he's black white or brindle, I'd said. But it did make a difference." (Sarah Thornhill, 260)

Grenville's trilogy intriguingly deals with the horrific past in a fictional treatment to history. It is histories that are Grenville's concern. Sarah's story shows how unknown individual stories fill the past and create the present. Stricken Sarah, appalled by knowledge of her father's inhumanity, believes "there is no cure for the bite of the past" (books.google.co.in).

Grenville's novels negotiate between history and fiction. As Brigid Rooney, in her essay 'Kate Grenville as Public Intellectual' notes, Grenville was singled out for the debate on history and fiction, "not because she is the worst offender, but because she has thought hard about what she is doing and is ready to talk about it frankly" (LDP, 210).

The Secret River unravels the bleak past of colonization, opening the Pandora's Box of Australian history, tinged with the collective feeling of white guilt, and questions the dubious nature of Australian identity. *The Lieutenant* also uses the historical archive to re-evaluate the first contact and vivifies the fact that the tragedy of Australian history is mainly owing to language and miscommunication. In *Sarah Thornhill* there is a dire attempt to shake the gloom of sleep from the minds of the Australians, reminding them that it is high time they expiated the crimes that they had done to the aborigines. With this perception of Grenville's work, one is sure to "get a glimpse of a colonial past where interactions across the cultural divide were more complex than many historical accounts have presented them as" (LDP, 210).

Conclusion

Though Grenville deals with a bleak past, she does not forget to highlight the roles of her heroines, delineating her secondary theme of Womanism. Mired in dark colonial history, Australia's past has lessons to offer us, as evidenced in these novels. Themes including the disputation on the reconstruction of Australia's past history, the guilt of white settlement in Australia, empathetic view on the treatment meted out to the black aborigines, the clash of communication and the confusion caused by the alien languages

during colonization have an enduring effect on the readers. This enduring effect makes the novels by Grenville relevant and meaningful to the current Australian generation.

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