

## Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* as Contextualizing Historical Experience in Australia

**Amudha E., M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., Ph.D. Research Scholar**

Department of English

Bharathi Women's College, Chennai-600108

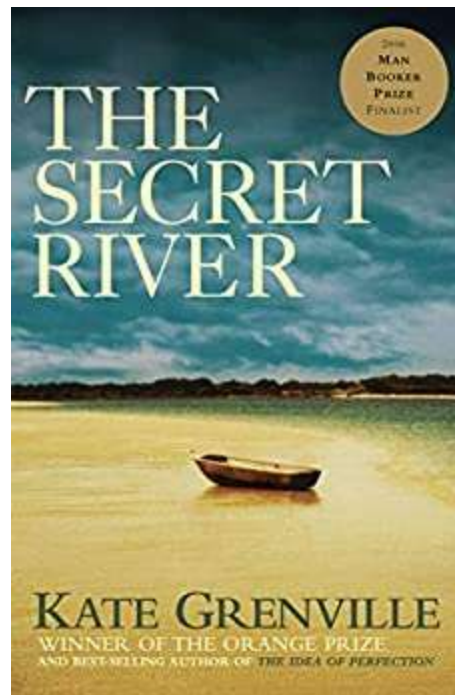
Tamilnadu, India

[Ezhil.amudha@yahoo.com](mailto:Ezhil.amudha@yahoo.com)

[amudhaezhil2529@gmail.com](mailto:amudhaezhil2529@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This paper attempts how human beings understand their land in a select novel of Kate Grenville, namely, *The Secret River*. Her novels present different aspects of understanding the land. The researcher has tried to describe Grenville's *The Secret River* in various positions, especially nationalism, colonialism, and transnationalism. The novel ultimately fits a post-colonial framework though all the ideologies are present too. The paper first attempts to study the various perspectives that surround the broad area of Australian settlements and

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literature. Of these the most dominating ideology is nationalism which is present in all her novels.

**Keywords:** Kate Grenville, *The Secret River*, Journey, Colonialism, Post-Colonial, Transnationalism, Nationalism, Negotiation.

## Introduction



Kate Grenville

Courtesy: <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/kate-grenville>

Kate Grenville is one of the most eminent and celebrated Australian novelists. She is famous for her historical novels. She was born in a domicile which was replenished with books in Sydney in 1950. She was deeply stimulated by her father's gift for storytelling. From her childhood, she knew that she wanted to be a writer. She majored in English literature at the University of Sydney.

Kate Grenville locates her novels in Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries before the advent of the ideology of stolen generation (the Aboriginal people forcibly removed from their families as children between the 1900s and the 1960s, to be brought up by white foster families or in institutions, definition in [https://www.google.com/search?q=stolen+generation+definition&rlz=1C1CHBF\\_enUS794US795&oq=stolen+generation&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0j46j0l5.4914j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=stolen+generation+definition&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS794US795&oq=stolen+generation&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0j46j0l5.4914j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)). Her novels describe the pioneering movements of the European settlers in Australia and New Zealand. These books encouraged writers to negotiate with indigenous peoples all over the land. In each of her novels, Grenville makes an attempt to understand the psyche of European settlers and indigenous peoples.

In 2010, she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of New South Wales. Her novels are based on significant historical events or era backdrop to the story. Characters may be fictional or historical or a mix of both. Most historical novels conform fairly closely to the conventions of Romance than Realism, although there have been exceptions to this rule, notably in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869). (Kate Grenvill.com)

In the early part of the twentieth century, European nations controlled much of the earth's surface. The changes they made in the political and cultural landscape of the world, for good or ill remain to this day. (*Colonialism: A primary source Analysis* 6)

Australia is a very large continent, with a large selection of land formations. In a great deal of Australia, there are sizzling deserts. Another part of Australia is covered in thick rainforests. In these places there are many Aborigines living today. Some Aborigines live in the cities and have become entirely updated. Most Aborigines live in the desert part of Australia, which covers much of Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia, and part of Queensland. There, it is burning hot in the day and freezing cold at night. They have become accustomed to this, wearing little or no clothes in the day and fur blankets at night. (*World history* 8)

The nation is a territorial community of nativity. (*Nationalism* 7) One is born into a land. "The significance attributed to this biological fact of birth into historically evolving, territorial structure of the cultural community of the nation is why the nation is one among a number of forms of kinship. It differs from other forms of kinship such as the family because of the centrality of territory. It differs from other national societies such as a tribe, city-state, or various 'ethnic groups' not merely by the greater area of its territory, but also because of its relatively uniform culture that provides permanency, that is, continuation over time" (*Nationalism* 7).

The Europeans history of New Zealand can be located within a second phase of imperial expansion. Nearly three centuries after the establishment of European hegemony in the Atlantic with the colonization of the Americas, neo-Europe's were transplanted to the Pacific to produce new nations and political forms through landscape. (*A Concise History of Australia* 22)

Colonialism is the extension of a country's rule to lands beyond its own borders. These "New" lands established by the parent country called colonies. The colonies may be either settler colonies, to which colonists move permanently, or dependencies, which are governed by a parent country but to which a few colonists actually move. (*Colonialism* 5)

During the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the sentiment of colonial nationalism served the desire to mark Australia off from Britain and Europe. Then, as the last imperial ties were, severed, even that way of distinguishing the child from the parent lost meaning. In its place arose the idea of Australia as a destination from all-comers from every part of the world, which served the multicultural attitudes that formed in the closing decades of the twentieth century. (*History of Australia 3*)

*Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature* by Nathanael O' Reilly presents thirteen essays that address the numerous ways in which Australian literature is postcolonial and can be read using postcolonial reading strategies. The collection addresses a wide variety of Australian texts produced from the colonial period to the present, including works by Henry Lawson, Miles Franklin, Patrick White, Xavier Herbert, David Malouf, Peter Carey, Rodney Hall, Andrew McGahan, Elizabeth Jolly, Judith Wright, Kate Grenville, Janette Turner Hospital, Melissa Lukashenka, Kim Scott, and Alexis Wright. The chapters focus on works by Indigenous authors and writers of European descent, and examine specifically postcolonial issues, including hybridity, first contact, resistance, appropriation, race relations, language usage, indignity, immigration/invasion, land rights and ownership, national identity, marginalization, mapping, naming, mimicry, the role of historical narratives, settler guilt and denial, and anxieties regarding belonging.

Transnationalism is an old phenomenon but a relatively new type of enquiry. Even before nation-states existed, communal boundaries had been traversed by both material and ideas, mobility, trade and communication are the conduits of transnationalism, enabling flows of people goods, skills, diseases, lifestyles and beliefs, as well as fostering common interests among people in different locations. Human communities, including modern nation-states, exist because of the physical boundaries of Geography, ecology, and biology, as well as the intangible boundaries of culture and national history. (*A Higher Authority Indigenous Transnationalism and Australia 2*)

The Aborigines initially came to Australia around 40,000 years ago. Some historians and anthropologists think it may have been as many as 120,000 years ago. Many thousands of years ago, the sea level was much lower than it is currently. When sea levels dropped, the ocean distances between Southeast Asia and Australia shrank greatly. People may have first come to Australia by boat from other parts of Southeast Asia during one of these periods. The Aborigines' culture and ways of living changed very little in all those thousands of years. Dutch, Spanish, French, and British ships sailed into Australian waters in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. This changed the lives of the Aborigines forever.

The Aborigines had no scheme of money. They did not have the European belief that an individual might buy a division of the humanity and would then have the right to do with it as he or she liked and could utilize it to make money. By distinction, white culture was based on the system of free endeavor, or entrepreneurship, in which a human being could keep for them whatever they had acquired by hard effort or good fate. (*History of Australia* 50)

The whites also established a system called Welfare homes for the uneducated, uncivilized Aboriginals children. The aim of the home is to make the children civilized and educated, but in reality, the main idea of the institution is to wash away the blackness out of white Australia because in 1910 Australia was highly populated by the aborigines. The half-caste children were born to an aborigine mother and a white father. These children were taken away by force by the white authorities from their aborigine mother.

The aborigine mothers were against this concept. So, they demanded that they didn't want their children to be educated and they were happy with what they were. But the white blamed them that the aborigines aren't good enough to look after the child and that is why the children were taken away by force by the white authorities. Children were trained in domestic duties, so that they can become domestic servants to white families because cheap labor was the aim of the white family, hence they preferred small aboriginal children.

The physical journey involves sufferings because of the bad weather conditions and the existence of the 'others' whose culture and lifestyle are strange and aloof to the traveler or the migrant. It also involves happiness when he/she gets the acquaintance of the 'other' once they understand their tradition and behavior. Whites feel free and believe that they will lead a peaceful and successful life in Australia.

Kate Grenville's novels focus on journeys that lead individuals from ignorance to knowledge, knowledge about self and the landscapes. Physical journey of travelling through Australia landscapes signifies emotions, psychological journey into the 'the self'. 'Journeys' become an important theme in Kate's fiction.

The physical journeys through the Australian landscape symbolize the psychological journey into her characters' 'selves'. The journeys end in epiphany or discovery that leads to the negotiation and finally the acceptance and assertion of both the 'self' and the 'other'.

The paper attempts to read Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* as a journey of negotiation where people understand, accept the complexities and pluralities of their own

existence, the existence of ‘others’ and thereby their existence as a nation. Grenville’s novels focus on how an individual’s journey reflects the nation’s journey.

### ***The Secret River***

The novel *The Secret River* deals with a convict settlement of Australia. William Thornhill, the protagonist, identifies the land to settle down. Once again, the land becomes the source of power. Kate Grenville projects how the human will go in search of land to establish his identity.

The *Secret River* tells the story of William Thornhill, an insolvent impoverished protagonist who works as a beginner to Mr. Middleton, a waterman on the Thames. He spends seven years as an apprentice, shipping the gentry from one side to the other. He abominates the gentry and repudiates their superior ways. He feels sad for his lower social position. Yet, he continues to work as an apprentice to Mr. Middleton because of his love for Sal, the daughter of Mr. Middleton, and also due to his poverty-stricken family condition. He works himself into the ground in an effort to gain the security that he will marry Sal and once he gets married to her, he can come into the control of Mr. Middleton.

One fine day, they get married, and he becomes a master of his own boat which was a wedding present from Mr. Middleton. William feels happy that he has left the dire poverty of his childhood behind. However, tragedy soon strikes their joyful, peaceful life. A month long cold freezes the Thames. So, William cannot work as a waterman. Mrs. Middleton capitulates to a fever and he dies. Hence Sal and William are left penniless. The bailiffs remove the house on Swan Lane and the boats.

William then works as a waterman for another master. He doesn’t earn enough money to support his family and he is forced to steal. His family would starve without the goods he steals from the top. Unfortunately, he is caught when he is trying to steal a delivery of Brazil wood and he is sentenced to death. It is because of Sal’s efforts his death sentence is commuted to the extradition to the convict settlement in Australia.

Sal and their elder son Willie are allowed to go to Australia. On their way to Australia, Sal gives birth to a baby boy named Dick. In Sydney, William works as a waterman in the harbor and employs his old tricks to fly off rum from the barrels in order to run his family. Sal opens a little bar called the Pickled Herring. After twelve months in the colony William gets his ticket of leave and he decided to leave his job before they caught him stealing. He goes to work for Thomas Blackwood, an acquaintance from London, who owns boats, and he plies the trade between Sydney and the settlements along the Hawkesbury River.

On his first voyage to the Hawkesbury, William is greatly surprised by the beauty of the vast, rich, resourceful land and names the land as “Thornhill’s Point”. He decides to claim the land one day and have a secure, happy life for his family. He also meets a cunning, cruel, mean-mouthed settler Smasher Sullivan on his first voyage to Hawkesbury who behaves so violently with the Aborigines. Blackwood intensely dislikes him and disagrees with his racial hatred of the Aborigine.

Thomas Blackwood has learned to respect the Aborigines and treat them as equal. He advocates living in peaceful co-existence based on his philosophy of give a little/ take a little. Blackwood then resolves to retire to his land and sell his own boat to William. William and Willie take up the trade and rowing up and down the river along the Hawkesbury, transporting goods from the harbor and earn a good living for the family. Then William informs his wish to settle in Thornhill’s Point to Sal.

At first Sal resists his will because she wants to go back to London once they earn enough money. Eventually, Sal agrees to his decision by giving him five years and they move to Thornhill’s Point. However, in reality, William deceives her by saying that they will go back to London once they earn enough money. He actually doesn’t want to return to London because he had a bad character in London as a thief and a convict.

From the first day of their advent to “Thornhill’s Point”, William begins having a series of problems with the Aborigines. A clan of Aborigines who lives near the land of Thornhill opposed William’s possession of the land. Thornhills are bothered and worried about the intrusion of the Aborigines to their land. The aborigines unknowingly and innocently strip the corn patch of William. William fights with the Aborigine at the corn patch, hurting women and firing a shot. The Aborigines retaliate by igniting the corn patch. Sal insists on leaving the land, but Thornhill was adamant in his decision and does not want to give away his desire and ambition to become a rich, respected man in the society.

In the midst of all, William notices smoke from another settlement where Saggity, a cruel person like Smasher Sullivan lives. William rushes to Saggity’s place to help him Saggity has been speared by the Aborigines and he dies. His death becomes a war cry for the settlers in Australia. A group of settlers led by Smasher Sullivan accede to get rid of the involvement of the Aborigines to their land. Thornhill is not a cruel man and he does have an understanding of the Aborigine’s humanity, their lifestyle and their innocence. However, he assents to participate in attach because he wants Sal to stay on Thornhill’s Point.

The battle with the Aborigines is bloodstained and sanguinary, with children and women clubbed to death. Whisker Harry, the chief of the Aborigines spears Smasher and in

turn William shoots Whisker Harry. Then the Aborigines hide behind the trees and no longer bother the settlers along the Hawkesbury. Finally, William becomes a wealthy landowner and trader. He constructs a grand stone house on Thornhill's Point and the new settlers regard him a member of Australia's new gentry. After the bloody dispersal of the Aborigines, his young son Dick leaves him to live with Thames Blackwood. Dick can't accept his father's participation in the slaughter and he never speaks to William again. Thornhill says to Sarah:

It was easy to wish to belong in this house, number 31, Swan Lane. Even the name of the street was sweet. He could imagine how he would grow into himself in the warmth of such a home. It was not just the generous slab of bread, spread with good tasty dripping: it was the feeling of having a place. Swan Lane and the rooms within it were part of Sal's very being, he could see, in a way no place had ever been part of his. (17)

In these lines Kate Grenville shows the contrast between the lifestyle of Sal and William. William Thornhill is deprived of all the pleasures including the basics such as food and shelter; in contrast Sal is blessed with a sweet Swan Lane. William Thornhill dreams of a place with all comforts similar to Swan Lane which cannot be taken from him by anyone at any time. The love which he has for this is even more than the love which he had for Sal. Grenville describes the emotions of Thornhill:

He had a sudden dizzying understanding of the way men were ranged on top of each other, all the way from the Thornhill to the bottom up to the King, or God, at the top, each man higher than one, lower than the other. (26)

William Thornhill respects Mr. Middleton being a great businessman with a sweet house and sufficient food. He does not like his lowly position. He craves to be in a high position. Therefore, he violently attracts the opportunity to create a new life in Australia. He enjoys the feeling of no longer being at the bottom rung of the society. Grenville describes the feelings of the blacks (aborigines):

There were no signs that the blacks felt that the place belonged to them. They had no fences that said this is mine. No house that said this is our home. There were no fields or flocks that said we have put the labour of our hands into this place. (93)

The scene evoked by Kate Grenville here talks about the community of blacks to lose their position in the world hierarchy as they had no concept of owning land. The white man who understood the power of land negotiates with land and establishes his status quo.



The aborigines were more attached to their land. They lived as one with the land. William Thornhill realizes his statement that Aborigine is a lazy nomad. The love of aborigine shows the nativity of the land, at the same time shows understanding of the society. It shows the acceptance of the new land.

Sal notices difference between each and everything that she could see. She struggles a lot to get used to different types of trees and she feels tried to look at things. This also shows the avoidance of Sal and acceptance of William Thornhill of the land.

The conflict with the whites and the Aborigines is for Land. Both the races are hurt in the process. Kate Grenville's novels present the "worldviews" presenting the human involvement the land and the pain it brings.

### **Conclusion**

In the novel *The Secret River*, Kate Grenville attempts to study the nuances of feelings in the minds of people who migrate to a new land. She studies how people understood the new land, how they tried to learn its customs, language, culture and how they tried to belong to this new land and how they ultimately settled down. Kate Grenville explores the human settlement experiences in Australia. Her interview with Ramona Koval calls the novel *The Secret River* as "a tale that seeks to gain advantage point from which to view Australia's European settlement" ("Biography").

Kate Grenville is engaged with the lives of convicts and free Immigrants. These lives are part of her writing. The aborigines picked up English quietly but did not pick up the cultures of Europeans. For example, the aborigine had culture in which individual competition, individual striving, individual ownership were not part of their worldview, and they were unable to understand the way settlers marked out a bit of land for themselves individually, put a fence around it and called it theirs. The settlers, likewise, just could not understand that the Aborigines had just as a great sense of territory as they themselves did, but they didn't need to build fence of a house or a road to have that. So, it was a tragic inability to communicate across a gulf of culture. Hence, the settlers regarded the aborigines as nonhuman. There was a barrier to understand. Kate Grenville's research into this part of human history makes her understand the European mind. Kate Grenville describes the fear built up in the minds of Europeans whether they were going to be scalped or going to be eaten or whether the children would be killed. ("Biography")

Kate Grenville's stories are imaginations of what the white settlers might have felt and experienced. Kate Grenville calls it "the white settler response" ("Biography"). She says that she cannot imagine the aboriginal response. Her works are the responses of the European

settlers. She realizes that there are no winners in human history. Everything is about the choices that people make in their lives. Her works stand outside polarised conflicts and do not project the whites as good and blacks as bad.

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