



ABORIGINAL SCRUTINY IN KATE GRENVILLE'S THE SECRET RIVER

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ABSTRACT

The Aboriginal people are not the only native inhabitants who had to face the cruel reality of European invasion and later settlement. One of the most important features which distinguishes Australian Aboriginal people from other Indigenous people is the attempt of Europeans to reeducate Aboriginal people by sending them to special settlements or to white families and thus stealing the children from their families. Aboriginal literature begins as a cry from the heart directed at the Whiteman. It is a cry for justice and for a better deal, a cry for understanding and an asking to be understood. Australian novelist Kate Grenville, the winner of numerous prizes for her literary work, was born in Sydney. She is a white mainstream writer which might not fit into the work devoted to the Aboriginal writing. Australian history is full of secrets and the first encounters between Aboriginal people and European settlers are one of them. The main theme of the novel *The Secret River* is the clash between two cultures – the Aboriginal and the European. British Privy Council declared the entire continent of Australia 'terra nullius' which means 'nobody's land'.

Keywords: Aboriginal people, History, Secrets, Europeans, Cultures

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal people are inseparable a part of Australia. Aboriginals are one of the oldest cultures in the world, their existence going back a minimum of forty thousand years. When one watch Australia we cannot consider just the isolated continent and its exceptional animal species but also its inhabitants. In *Black Words, White Page*, Shoemaker stresses the importance of Aboriginal people although they create up only two percent of the country population. The Aboriginal people aren't the only native inhabitants who had to face the cruel reality of European invasion and later settlement. However, the event of land seizure was distinct from other parts of the world: Australian Aborigines have much in common with other indigenous peoples suffered under the impact of European colonisation. But there are variety of distinctive features about the Australian Aborigines and the formation of the Australian colony that need to be recognized, so as for us to understand the particular forms of the representational complex which was constructed on their behalf. (Hodge and Mishra,24)

One of the most important features which distinguishes Australian Aboriginal people from other Indigenous people is the attempt of Europeans to reeducate Aboriginal people by sending them to special settlements or to white families and thus stealing the children from their families. Although Aboriginal people are the minority of Australian population, they play a really important role in Australian culture and history. they're not a homogenous folk – the Aboriginal people who do not live in the urban areas still remain in isolated rural communities and that they share a common heritage which may be



different from community to community.

Aboriginal people are a particular group of people who have strong traditions and whose culture is rooted in the remote past. A plenty of books and materials have been devoted to the theme of Aboriginality because it seems to be a “secret chamber” which remains unrevealed for most people. It's a quite complicated concept which cannot be fully understood by non-Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal literature begins as a cry from the guts directed at the Whiteman. It's a cry for justice and for a better deal, a cry out for understanding and an asking to be understood. These are the primary words in writing from the fringe by an Aboriginal author Mudrooroo Narogin. His novel *Wild Cat Falling* was published in Australia in 1965 and it's an important event for Aboriginal people because it is one of the landmarks of Aboriginal literature.

Storytelling is that the first form of literature. The oral tradition of Aboriginal people is rooted deep within the past; nevertheless, it still influences the fashionable Aboriginal literature.

Aboriginal people must have relied on their memory. They trained it through telling stories – the more they talked and listened, the higher their memory was. Storytelling is thus an instrument for education, keeping traditions, transferring information and last but not the smallest amount entertainment. It's almost unimaginable for people who have not experienced the oral tradition that storytelling could work for such a long time. It's admirable that Aboriginal people were able to absorb so much information and pass it further on.

Australians had to simply accept Aboriginal writing as a part of Australian literature because Aboriginal people are the inhabitants of this land and thus, they have the right to express their opinions by means of writing. As far as the themes of Aboriginal writing are concerned, they're manifold. It's important to point out that despite of this diversity, the aim of Aboriginal writing is always very similar. The cultural heritage of Indigenous people is reflected in their writing and therefore the Aboriginal experience is evident in the works of Aboriginal writers.

All the authors writing about Aboriginal society attempt to achieve the same aim – to express their personal ideas about Indigenous inhabitants and to share their views with readers. Shoemaker emphasizes the difference, yet the close connection, between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writing at the identical time as both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writers do not deal with the same topics. However, sometimes their approach is analogous (Shoemaker, 10).

Australian novelist Kate Grenville, the winner of various prizes for her literary work, was born in Sydney. She may be a white mainstream writer which might not fit into the work devoted to the Aboriginal writing.

There are not any strict rules about who is considered an Aboriginal writer and who is not. Besides writing about various topics like male – female relationships, Grenville



has decided to devote some novels to the important part of Australian history – the first encounters between Indigenous inhabitants of Australia and White settlers. Before she started writing, Grenville worked within the film industry. Her first book was published in 1984 as a set of short stories called *Bearded Ladies*. As the title suggests, these thirteen stories show women in several roles living in the men's world'. Since then she published several novels sharing the common divisor – gender relations. Well-known novels by Grenville include *The Idea of Perfection* (1999) – the winner of the Orange Prize. It's rather a 'love story' that traces and explores the role of the sexes and the relationships between them. The novel called *Joan Makes History* published in 1988 may be a parodic history of Australia written from the woman's point of view. The most female protagonist Joan Radulesco appears in different roles in Australian history within the novel. Joan also performs a task of an Aboriginal woman, which is that the first mention of Aboriginality in Grenville's work. Another novel which deals with the primary encounters between white settlers and Indigenous inhabitants is the most recent novel called *The Lieutenant* (2008). It traces the story of a soldier from the primary Fleet sent to Australia in 1788 and his interaction with the Indigenous inhabitants. He meets a young Aboriginal girl Patyegarang who teaches him her language. Their friendship represents the bridge between the 2 different cultures and the novel is thus perceived to be more positive than *The Secret River*.

In her novel *The Secret River* (2005), Grenville takes the readers back in time. It is a historical fiction based on the story of one of the Grenville's ancestors Solomon Wiseman. Although Grenville drew on the historical records and the events depicted in the novel really happened, the genre of fiction remains untrustworthy for understanding the past and in the fiction authors are those who decide about the outcome of a novel. The historical events in *The Secret River* are real but the characters are fictional. Grenville devoted couple of years to the research into her ancestry and also into the early colonial Australia. Besides reading theoretical books and studying, among others, the old ships and boats, she realized that she needed to explore the places she was going to write about by visiting each part of the land she wanted to portray. She has admitted in the interview that she is a great believer in the experiential theory of writing. Grenville experienced the turns of the weather, the harshness of the river and various difficulties while traveling along the Hawkesbury River. Australian history is full of secrets and the first encounters between Aboriginal people and European settlers are one of them: Grenville's symbolism is a striking reminder of the history that lies beneath our modern Australian state and of the ways in which that history has sometimes been deliberately suppressed to give the impression of more noble beginnings (Behrendt, 4). Australians don't appear to be pleased with this part of their history neither of the time of thus referred to as *Stolen Children* that is represented in Pilkington's novel.

The Secret River is a chronicle of a British man William Thornhill who is sentenced in 1806 to be transported to New South Wales in Australia. He is forced to leave his beloved England and start living in a completely unknown and alien land. Although his life in England is difficult – he had to face adversity when his parents and his wife's parents died and they had no money left – he loves it because he was born there. On the other hand, he knows that without stealing he and his family cannot survive. Australia, which is a convict colony, seems to be a harsh land at first. But at the same time it is a significant opportunity for a new, better start. William can start a new life here and provide 'security' to his family only after several years when he is granted a pardon.

William is happy here and he starts to feel tempted by owning a piece of land. It is so easy



for him to annex a hundred acres of the land and assert that it is his own. Will does not realize that it is a kind of theft as the land is inhabited for more than forty thousand years by Darug people.

The main theme of this novel is the clash between two cultures – the Aboriginal and the European. British Privy Council declared the entire continent of Australia ‘terra nullius’ which means ‘nobody’s land’. Great Britain used Australia as convict colony so the first settlers were mostly former convicts. Suddenly, two groups of different people needed the same land as a source of food and water. The clash between them was inevitable. The exiled British criminals had to coexist with the Indigenous people of Australia. They were unable to communicate together and this initial lack of understanding turned into fear. In the novel, Will is drawn into this clash. Although he is aware of the fact that Aboriginal people are usurped on their own land, his hunger for land prevails. When Will and his family settle down in Sydney, they encounter the first Aboriginal man whom they call Scabby Bill. The hunter-gatherer way of living, practiced by many Aboriginal people, is in contrast to the farming attempts of the white settlers. It is quite incomprehensible for the white settlers that the local Aboriginal people do not build houses to live in and the fences to guard their possessions. Will admires the ability of the Aboriginal population to organize their work and he envies them the spare time spent with their families. At the same time, Will is frightened of the inscrutable behavior of the Indigenous inhabitants.

In fact, there are two groups of the white settlers on the Hawkesbury River. One of them, the minority, tries to coexist with the Aboriginal people and tolerate their way of living. The second group is completely hostile towards the Indigenous inhabitants. Will cannot decide which group he will join but finally he becomes involved in a cruel massacre of the Aboriginal people. Will realizes that if he wants to own the land, he must fight against the Aboriginal people. The climax of the story, the final murderous violence, estranges Will from his wife and also from the son who used to play with the Aboriginal children as a child without any hints of hatred.

They would like to mention the background of the origin of the title of the book. as it was mentioned above, the word ‘secret’ is related to the Australian past which is closely connected to myths. The phrase ‘The Secret River’ is taken from the W. E. H. Stanner’s Boyer Lecture of 1968: —There could be a secret river of blood in Australian history [...] (Stanner qtd. in Grenville, Interview). Stanner is talking about the times of the first encounters between Aboriginal people and White settlers. Despite of the appalling consequences of this era, it seems to be a suppressed part of Australian history. Grenville found the expression ‘The Secret River’ fully appropriate for her title. Naming it ‘The River of Blood’ would be too far-fetched and it would give the book different connotations. The word —river is quite significant as it represents the substance of William’s life. He had been apprentice for seven years on the river Thames before he became a skilled waterman. In Australia he uses his knowledge from the apprentice years and makes his living on the Hawkesbury River.

The Thames means the exertions for Will as he has to face a great competition but it also represents the place where he was born and where his home is. On the other hand, the Hawkesbury River is that the unknown, dangerous place but quite prosperous. he’s one of the few watermen there so he can earn enough money to build his own house, which would



not be possible in London. according to Sean O'Brien, The secret River may be a tale of two rivers – one lost, the other ambiguously claimed. Both of them form an irretrievable an element of Thornhill's life.

It is important to point out that Grenville avoids giving voice to the Indigenous people in her novel. She is fully responsive to the fragile issue of the appropriation of Aboriginal voices in many literary works so she tries to be even-headed. Grenville doesn't try to pretend that she knows what the Aboriginal people are thinking about. She admits the problem of the task to write about the Aboriginal people: —That was tricky because what I didn't want to do was to step into the heads of any of the Aboriginal characters (Grenville, Interview). Grenville seems to be writing 'from the distance' without judging the characters and their actions. In my opinion, The secret River is a balanced portrayal of the first encounters between white settlers and Aboriginal people. The author leaves the reader judge who is complicit and who is innocent. She tries to be unbiased and fair when describing the skirmishes between the white settlers and therefore the Indigenous inhabitants. By refusing to —get in the minds of the Aboriginal characters, Grenville runs the risk of making her Aboriginal characters rather blank and unconvincing.

The Secret River offers a wide range of the Aboriginal characters but they seem to represent the whole community of people rather than just individuals. In fact, there are two groups of the Aboriginal people during this novel:

The black natives of the place seemed to come in two sorts. The visible ones were those who lived in the settlement. [...] The other sort of native was the kind that Thornhill had met on that first night, when they been on the very edge of civilisation. This sort of native was invisible to those like Sal who confined themselves to the township. They lived in the forest and in the bays where settlement had not yet reached, and melted away if any of the new arrivals tried to come close. (The Secret River 90-92)

The character of Scabby Bill thus embodies the 'visible' group of the Aboriginal people. He comes to the Thornhills' hut every day to beg for some food. He can even say a few English words. at first his naked body scandalizes the puritan white women because they are not accustomed to the sight of naked body of an adult man. Later on the nakedness of the Aboriginal people becomes ordinary for the white settlers. The different approach to nudity shows the gap between the two cultures. the items , like clothes, are important for Europeans as they can represent people's wealth. On the opposite hand, Aboriginal people don't consider any form of wealth important so they do not need to present it by clothes. Scabby Bill's nakedness reveals the scars on his body which will always remind him of the period of the Australian history when he and his contemporaries had to struggle for their land.

Nevertheless, William's wife Sal seems to urge used to Scabby Bill's presence. it's like an exchange: Sal gives him something to eat and Scabby Bill leaves. Each time Scabby Bill disappears, Sal feels relieved. Scabby Bill isn't a source of fear for the white settlers: —She [Sally] did not seem to fear him: he was the same as the ants or the flies, a hazard of the place that had to be dealt with (The Secret River, 91). He represents the group of Aboriginal people who can be appeased with food and drink. Scabby Bill is willing to try to to almost everything for a sip of rum. On the other hand, the Aboriginal people inhabiting the surroundings of the Hawkesbury River cannot be appeased with food donation. Will realizes that when his wife tries to supply food to them, but they appear to



want more: —It was the way she had dealt with Scabby Bill. Something told him that these two men were different from Scabby Bill [...] (The Secret River, 145). Even though the Aboriginal people accept the victuals, it's not the main reason why they visit the white settlers' dwellings. The Aboriginal people want to point out that their privacy was intruded and that it will not be left without consequences.

Generally speaking, the white settlers consider the Indigenous inhabitants to be 'savages'. The Aboriginal people lead completely different lives from the European newcomers: they do not live in houses and they do not wear clothes. they just wander around, sometimes kill some animals to provide food for their family and the rest of time is spent with their families: —It was true the blacks made no fields, and built no houses definitely worth the name, roaming around with no thought for the morrow. It was true that they did not even know enough to cover their nakedness, but sat with their bare arses on the dirt like dogs. altogether these ways they were nothing but savages (The Secret River, 229). The Aboriginal people devote a lot of time to their families and to the rituals such as dancing and singing. it's quite the opposite what the white settlers do. They exerting to be able to secure their families from starving. Will compares the lifetime of the Aboriginal people to the life of aristocracy in England: —Gradually, Thornhill starts faintly to understand that the Aborigines most remind him of the gentry back home. They don't appear to figure for their food: they spend their days creating art, telling stories, making their babies laugh (Bedell, 40). The white settlers need to leave their families, if they need any, fairly often to search for sources of living and as far as arts and any other forms of free time are concerned there is no spare time for them.

As the Aboriginal people are everywhere, the white settlers must put up with the very fact that the land is not theirs only. The presence of the Aboriginal people is perceived differently by the newcomers. The white settlers don't know anything about the Indigenous inhabitants so the first encounters are very cautious. William learns about the Aboriginal people from the Europeans, most of them convicts, who settled down in Australia earlier. When Smasher Sullivan, one of the white settlers, talks about the gruesome murders committed by Aboriginal people, Will's children are scared to death. of these rumours contribute to prejudices against the Aboriginal people.

“As a wealthy, stable democracy, Australia could lead the world on human rights yet too often Australian governments fail to respect people's human rights in critical areas. Australia's treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and refugees and people seeking asylum in particular are likely to be in the spotlight at the review.” (news) As it was mentioned above, Grenville tries to avoid giving voice to her Aboriginal characters, as she is aware of the fact that she cannot speak for people who are not her kin. She combines her imagination with the years of research about Aboriginal people and thus portrays the Aboriginal people in her novel. Grenville reflects the cultural alienation of her ancestors within the new land wherever they're falling apart not solely from their own land however additionally from their culture. Grenville's fiction is a component of the history that she had unbroken inside her own heart before commercial enterprise it. In fact, before the manifestation of her novel, she lived inside her own exile and alienation, however through The Secret River, Grenville emancipates herself from each of them a minimum of mentally, if not physically.



Grenville makes an attempt to indicate that *The Secret River* is not judgment on any of her characters and their actions but reveals to the reader the results of their actions. *The Secret River* shows Grenville's angle towards exile and alienation as two harmful components that have an effect on the lifetime of each settlers and indigenous people.

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