

History retold through Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*

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Abstract- This abstract explores how literature helps to bring out the truth buried behind Australia's brutal past. The novel *The Secret River* helps to break the silence of the white settlers of Australia on how they have come to be so rich despite their beginnings as convicts. Kate Grenville, a non-indigenous writer of Australia wanted to rewrite history for the sake of aboriginal natives and to help them in making a chronicle of their own. This abstract traces Kate's endeavour in rewriting the dark legacy of colonialism. She grew up hearing stories about her ancestors from her mother, but now looking back at it, there was never a mention of the indigenous people in any of the family legends. When the penal colony of New South Wales was first established about two hundred years back, there were already people living in Australia, even before the colonisation of Britain. The natives are not called aborigines for no reason. It was a shock to the system that the mysterious disappearance of the aboriginal people had been kept silent in history. Kate Grenville takes a bold stand and breaks that silence once and for all by explaining the brutal truth of the killing massacre carried out by her white ancestors on the natives just to 'take up' their lands and feel 'settled'. The secret river of blood is veining under Australia's dark past and staining the white settlers' conscience with the innocent aborigines' blood on their hands. Kate despite being a non-indigenous writer tries to do right by her indigenous brothers and sisters by going so far as to break the innocent façade of her own great-great-grandfather, Solomon Wiseman, whom the novel has been modelled upon, with the accounts of the real facts and incidents of the history untold.

Keywords: History, Silence and Retold.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has always had the potential to explore things which are left unspoken for some reason or the other. It stands tall in breaking that unspoken agreement and proceeds to break any barrier the society may create. Kate Grenville rewrites Australian history, boldly recording its neglected past. She says that she wanted to keep it as truthful as it was. She believes that until after a story is retold with a shadow, we will never achieve growth as society.

The concepts of 'rewriting history' and 'writing back' have ensured their places under the column of recent trends in literature after the popularity they have achieved notably among the orientals. The colonised people who have been deprived of their nation's past, wanted to rerecord their unbiased history.

The European colonisers had not only invaded the innocent people's lands rather they had robbed the natives of their cultural values and past, choosing to thrust their own culture upon them. Frantz Fanon, in his *The Wretched of The Earth*, argues that the colonised people should reclaim their past in order to find their voice and identity.

Here, Kate Grenville, a non-indigenous writer, voices on behalf of her indigenous brothers and sisters to reclaim their past. She has taken up the task of rewriting Australia's history that she is not bothered about tearing the innocent façade of her own great-great-grandfather, Solomon Wiseman, who has been given the name of William Thornhill in the novel, *The Secret River*.

In one of her interviews, Kate confesses that she did not look too much into the family legend of her great-great-grandfather Solomon Wiseman until she encountered a native aborigine woman and started imagining their forefathers meeting two hundred years back. She was shocked to find that the woman did not have any first-hand knowledge about her ancestors which made her realise that the family folklore did not record her own ancestors encountering any of the aborigine natives either. Kate was very sure that there must have aboriginal people existed in Australia when the penal colony of New South Wales was first established much less before the invasion of the British. So the lack of any mention of the aborigines did not make any sense until it started an array of questions on their mysterious disappearance.

Kate Grenville, for the first time in her life, started wondering how Solomon Wiseman persuaded the natives to leave or

more precisely what he did to make them leave their land in the first place. What events were hidden behind the terms of 'settled' and 'took up land' was the one question that made her probe into the family story which did not seem so innocent anymore.

Australia is now swarming with both the descendants of the indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. But the mystery behind the beginnings of these peoples had been buried in the history for so long, that it was about time that they are exposed to the world and Literature is only too happy to be obliging for that.

When the penal colony of New South Wales was first established under the Kingdom of Britain, the capital did not seem to care for the black natives already living there, rather it saw it as a way to restore its frailing authority among the neighbouring countries after losing the colony of America after the latter's revolution. The innocent people of Australia could not resist the invasion for they were not aware of such thing called 'colonised'.

The colonisers had come into the island unannounced and taken up to claiming the land as their own for they seemed to be sporting an illusion of being better than anyone for the very fact that they were white and civilised. They justified the injustice inflicted upon the natives by projecting that they had a hand in making the colonised people civilised. They started writing the history of Australia, neglecting the real facts and incidents which might question their own conscience.

But by the time the colonizers got their freedom, they were wide awake enough to reclaim their past. The former voiceless people started voicing out through their pens.

The year of 1806 introduced the aborigines of Australia to a new set of convicts who looked quite different from what the natives were used to. The ship named Alexander came sailing into the shore of Sydney Cove, carrying the convicts to the penal colony. These white convicts were sentenced to death for the crimes they committed back at home in England but were given the pardon in exchange of being slaves to the assigned masters in the new land. The new masters were, more often than not, the former white convicts who had served up their time and now known as emancipates.

William Thornhill was one among the newcomers and he was fortunate enough to dodge his sentence of hanging to death and to start his new life in the new land. He came with his wife and children. He was assigned as a slave to his wife, Sal. After experiencing death so close, he had a new fondness towards life. He became religious about not stealing anymore

for his thieving expedition had put him in this predicament. So were the other convicts.

But upon seeing the fertility of the new land, they were ready to try their hands at stealing again. This time they were not going to steal things but the lands. The very lands which with their abounding fertility had them salivating over the new future they were sure to offer. The unauthorised lands seemed to promise them the things that they would never get to experience back at home in England, as former convicts. All the convicts were in the same predicament. It was as though they were seeing water for the first time in the middle of the desert. The convicts could see their name written on the unclaimed lands. And they were well aware of what it would mean to own a land. The whites were already witnessing the emancipates, the former convicts being wealthy businessmen. The thought of owning something warmed their hearts to an extent that they turned a blind eye to the presence of the real owners of the land, the aborigines.

The white settlers despised the black natives at sight. The innocent natives' continued existence was a constant reminder for the whites that the place was not theirs to lord over rather their reality was awaiting them back at home in England, as former convicts.

The natives' nakedness was just a reason for the white settlers to be categorised them as uncivilized. They thought that the black natives were incompetent as they did not bother to save up for tomorrow. The whites envied the carefree life of the natives as they did not seem to have a care in the world. According to them, whatever the land had to offer them, it was for their taking, nothing more or less.

The convicts who had known hunger all their life, did not want to leave all these fertility behind. But that doesn't justify their actions. They started taking patches of lands and claiming them as their own. They started growing crops there, not for the purpose of food, but as a sign of ownership to the land. They started naming the lands after themselves. They had been so forgone in their minds about finally owning something, that they did not stop to think about the injustice they were inflicting on the aborigines. They chose not to acknowledge it.

They were afraid of the natives. There were rumours that the natives were so aggressive in their pursuit that there had been a bloodshed or two. The Gazette, the colonial newspaper had a column called Outrages and Depredations, recording the activities of the blacks, making them out to be uncivilized savages.

William Thornhill had taken up a patch of land shaped as his own thump, naming the place as Thornhill's point. His greed over the land had him dig up the land and planting a few corps ensuring his authority of the land. The already digged up land did not seem to deter him from claiming Thornhill's point as his own. He was shocked to find some of the natives already living there, but his assumed superiority over them did not make him leave the land. When he happened to chance an encounter with those natives, he had snide comments about them not having any place to go in the near future, once they were done with them. They had names for the natives. There was this one man who had a spear that looked as sharp as a knife that Thornhill named him Whisker Harry and they had names for the other natives too. They were called as Long Bob, Meg and Polly. They named a man Scabby Bill for his face looked like that it had been mauled by chickenpox. It was not out of fondness for the natives.

The whites thought they were superior to the natives. They saw them as savages. When Thornhill happened to see his younger son, Dick playing with the aboriginal children, without his clothes on, he reprimanded the little boy. "Sal sat Dick down that night and tried to explain. They are savages, Dick. We are civilised folk, we don't go round naked" (222). The more the settlers had claimed the land as their own, the more the natives had to fight for the food in their own land. They started making their presence known to the whites. That started a conflict between the two breeds. Smasher, a former convict had killed a black man and hanged him in the nearby tree to show his authority and to teach him a lesson as he caught the man trying to take corn from his land he supposedly owned. "Learned that foxy thief, the man was shouting. Learned him good and proper!" (106). He had also taken a black woman against her will and held her captive.

The whites grew bold in going against the natives. They thought that the natives' spears were not match for their guns. They wanted to teach the aborigines lesson, driving the innocent people into hiding in their very own land where they were living freely not so long ago. As the atrocities grew, the natives started retaliating back. Their survival instincts had kicked in and made them stand up against the whites. The encounters with the natives had been making the rounds in the Gazette.

The Government did not want to lose against the natives. It had sent an army to take care of the black natives, meaning the elimination of the innocent people. The white army under the guidance of Captain McCallum had made a plan of executing Pincer-movement which resembled a human chain. The army with their preferred weapons of guns went in search of the natives in their hide-outs to kill them. The stooping

river under the cave turned blood after the execution of the murder plan.

The other natives grew more cautious. They were afraid of making their presence known. But having witnessed their brothers and sisters' brutal end, it had them wanting to attack back. The natives started their counter attack by going to a settler Saggity's hut to burn it down. Saggity was also brutally attacked. The news of the counter attack started spreading all over the colony. It reached William Thornhill too. His wife Sal had decided to leave the colony once and for all when her maternal instincts started ringing bells. William Thornhill was not so happy to be leaving all the treasure behind. He started evading his wife's attempts. But he knew his wife very well that with the lingering threats of natives, she would not risk the lives of her children.

So William Thornhill, along with Smasher, George Twist, Dan Oldfield and some other white settlers made a plan to eliminate the threat of the natives in order to continuously making their living there in Australia. They did not even spare a second thought to take out the aborigines. They were bent on killing the indigenous people that they masked their reason of greed behind revenge. They pretended that they were only attacking the natives in order to seek revenge for Saggity's death, but William Thornhill seemed to have a clear idea about why he was going to do what he did. He did not want to leave all the money he could make on this island. He did not want to go back to his homeland, only to be living as a waterman again.

While Sal was making preparations for their leave, the white men army, consisted of Smasher, Will, Dan and Ned, Mr. Webb and George Twist approached the blacks at the first light of dawn. The war was bloody that Smasher and Dan had nearly killed most of the blacks with the guns and Smasher got the glimpse of one black woman with a child that he recognised her to be with Blackwood, a former convict that he started attacking the woman only to have Blackwood attack him back. Soon the two whites fought bloodily that Blackwood was brutally injured with Smasher's nose squeezing blood out. That was the end of Smasher.

When a cry of the little child came from among the dead bodies of the blacks, Dan took a pole and had mercilessly beaten it into silence. The black natives of Whisker Harry, Polly, Meg and the others were now dead. Long Bob had no one of his family left. He was alone now. There would be no dancing around the campfire, leaving a calm night with no sounds from their part of the island.

The massacre had been buried behind the white settlers' silence. When interviewed by people of their beginnings, these white convicts who were now known as the old colonialists, would construct a story so well that it was convincing enough even for them to be believing it. Thornhill was found to be a wealthy businessman years later, posing for his portrait, explaining to the painter how he, as a Kentish young man, came to be settling in this island, not as a convict. Though the lie seemed to come so easily, the anxiety that he always bore with him, anticipating to see a black man, peering into his mansion someday, did not seem to be in a hurry to leave him any time soon.

The settlers were very aware of what they had done to the innocent people to occupy their lands. They could not have imagined for their lives that one day all that they thought was buried, would come back to haunt them. The colonised people have found their voice and they have found a way to echo their voice far and wide through their writings. The colonised people are now writing back, reclaiming their culture and past, by reconstructing their history, only to be supported by the people from all over the world, including their non-indigenous brothers and sisters.

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