

Owning A Fragile Hold: Claim of The Muted Voice in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*

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Abstract: *Reams of words have already been written on Australian Aborigine and their land.* Colonialisation, displacement, dislocation- these are the theoretical bedrocks of postcolonial literary critique in Australia. Responding to postcolonial scholarship, which focuses on the violence of colonialism on indigenous people and also on the unsung voices of speaking or writing back, I envisage studying Kate Grenville's Australian-Aboriginal novel *The Secret River* (2005). This fictional history of Grenville deals with the Aboriginal places not only as concrete locations, but also as community memories- more of an Aboriginal psychological landscape. The colonial connotation of *terra nullius* in disguise of the early settlers tried to own the mythic land of natives but failed spiritually. Indigenous people are able to create, re-create and assert their places in which their cultures and ethnic identities survive by way of challenging colonial authority over their lands. In the novel the white-settler's experience of owning a land has been countered by the muted voice of speaking Aborigines as well as of speaking place.

Keywords: Aborigine, colonialisation, landscape, own, failure, muted voice, speaking place

British colonial empire called Australia a new country and the early white settlers took up the new land for a new history. They inscribed the history of owning-clearing-cultivating-civilising an unproductive land by way of erasing out the Aborigine's own cultural and social history. Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* (2005) is a fictional account of this early contact history in Australia. The novel deals with the colony of New South Wales, newly unoccupied place to British convict William Thornhill and his family. This William Thornhill is a convict whose life is based upon that of Grenville's own ancestor, Solomon Wiseman. Thornhill is transported to New South Wales, and after getting freedom from his penal deportation he settles on the Hawkesbury River outside Sydney and tries to own a piece of land thereon. The main thrust of the story is of owning a land which centers on the historical and geographic setting with its pre-modern adversity as well as its seething colonial vs. Aboriginal tension. William Thronhill's drive for ownership of the land can imply a subtle reiteration of the concept of *terra nullius* as there appears to be no one there to claim or even know about the existence of the land. This turn of protagonist's attitude of the land could imply a coloniser's perspective as it was only in a pre-civilised limbo until the white people 'discovered' it. The novel is rooted in the history of colonialism in Australia and the references to actual events and people

from that period. In the early nineteenth century, the first white settlers arrived in the region, forcing the Aboriginal people off their lands. Europeans took control of (farm) land with the contrived theory of *terra nullius* and by relegating the indigenous to a subservient position. "The more civilized folk set themselves up on their pieces of land, the more those other ones could be squeezed out." (SR.121) The novel is a chronicle that catalogues the true events of colonial regime. William Thornhill is embarking on a colonial journey and as an explorer broaching new undiscovered, unchartered and unmapped territory of Australia. Here he is a prototype of an outlook which is basically of the coloniser: All a person needed to do was find a place no one had already taken. Plant a crop, build a hut, call the place Smith's or Flanagan's, and outstare anyone who said otherwise. (SR.121) In his conversation with Sal, Thornhill talks about grabbing the land: "*That bit of land*, he said. *Remember I telled you. We'll missout if we don't grab it.*" (SR.122) The land was a 'place of promise' to him, "the blank page on which a man might write a new life." The colonial greed takes over Thornhill when he gets his ticket of leave, and the right to acquire land and own servants. In September 1813, William, his wife Sal, and their children (Willie, Dickie, Bub, and baby Mary) arrived at Thornhill's Point. The purpose of the arrival was to ascertain their claim to 100 acres of land. William was thrilled to set foot on his own land. "He could have been the only man on earth: William Thornhill, Adam in Paradise, breathing deep of the air of his own new-coined world." "His own. His own, by virtue of his foot standing on it." (SR.133) The land was virgin and uncivilized and it took incredible effort to carve out a piece of civilization. William with the help of his two older boys, Willie and Dick, set to work planting their first patch of corn. This was how they officially claimed the land as their own. Soon after he has rowed out to the Thornhill's Point, he marked out the space in which he would plant his first crop:

In the centre of the clearing he dragged his heel across the dirt four times, line to line. The straight lines and the square they made were like *nothing else there and changed everything*. Now there was a place where a man had laid his mark over the face of the land. It was astonishing how little it took to *own a piece of the earth*. (emphasis added) (SR.134)

The colonial propensity of William is shown again when he dismissed Dick's concern about the flat land by the river tilled by someone else (blacks), telling him that "Them poxy blacks don't plant nothing." Domination over the land (by the outsiders) speed up the followed confrontations with the Aborigines. William pulled up all the daisies (the flowers of the yams), the natural food of the natives. He set to work planting his patch of corn. He merely disregarded the apparent code of the presence of former owners of the land. This robbery of food supply is an 'oft-repeated early flashpoint' in colonial settlements around Australia. Soon after we had the exchange with the two black men: The man spoke loud and hard and gestured [...]. In any language, anywhere that movement of the hand said, *Go away*. Even a dog understood *Go Away* when he said it. (SR.147) The disagreement of the natives to the possession of their land and a few altercations escalated lastly to their

indiscriminate slaughter by the white settlers. Even though the encounter with the Aborigines was not soothing, William had no objective to take departure from his self created Thornhill's Point. Sal started to fashion a 'yard' out of the wilderness. The spousal activities proved to be of making a new homeland. Through the character of Sal, Kate Grenville investigates the basic zeal in colonial Western world to tame natural world, to enforce the methodical and systematic parameter of civilization on the alien landscapes. Sal's making of a physical space in form of a yard was her endeavors to create a colonial mindscape thereby envisaged an area of unfamiliar land under her control. William came to know the issuing hazards that the land he claimed had not been empty. It was inhabited by a people who view it as their own, but not in the sense of Western idea of ownership but in a greater sense of the place. They own a kind spiritual relationship with the landscape from the mythical time of Aboriginal *Dreaming*. While discussing about this relationship, Yi-Fu Tuan argues that "the Australian aborigines ... have a much stronger sense of history. Events leading to their present world are recorded in features of the landscape, and each time people pass a particular cleft, cave, or pinnacle they are enabled to recall the deed of an ancestor and cultural hero" (189). Because of his/her strong connection to the environment, "the native's identity ... is not in doubt, because the myths that support it are as real as the rocks and waterholes he can see and touch. He finds recorded in his land the ancient story of the lives and deeds of the immortal beings from whom he himself is descended, and whom he reveres. The whole countryside is his family tree" (Tuan 157-58). Aboriginal people take the land in high opinion; admire it and follow the teachings of elders about the ancestral beings who enriched the land with cultural artifacts. Pulling up the daisies and planting the corn turned to be the prologue for direct conflict with the Aborigines. The land now has two owners, one who tried to grab or own it from an aspect colonial rationale and other who mediated spiritual relationships from a mythical era. Neither of whom would abandon the land willingly. The circle of spears that the Aborigines placed around William's home was an indication of their readiness to struggle for their land. Sal and William soon comprehended that these Aborigines could not be tamed or bought off with a rotten piece of meat like Scabby Bill. Moreover William was willing to give the Aborigines a little foodstuff, but he was not agreeable to share his claim to the land.

Colonial attitude was also projected through William's dealings with his convict turned servants. Colonial authority reared its head in his conduct of the two convicts assigned to him- Ned and Dan. William was in control of their fate and that caused his supremacy over them. He enjoyed a great command ordering Ned and Dan around. He even compelled his childhood friend to address him as Mr. Thornhill. He fashioned to model some of his speech patterns and mannerisms on those of the gentry he had so hated in London. The two men under his authority is a metonymical projection of William's superior position in colonial hierarchy. William, through a great hardship and battle with Aborigines became a landowner in New South Wales. His possessions were of a colonizer. He had a gun which he used to shot at Long Jack and had the

laws of the British Empire to sustain his right to taste his power over the colonized. A fine house, 300 acres of land, a stable full of horses, boots for his children, servants, a stout wife, the best tea and liquor, even a full-length portrait hanging in the drawing room were all in his possessions now. He had the decisive assertion to the land on which he erected the mansion. He literally erased the testimony of the Aborigines' traditional habitation on the landscape. The well fortified building and fenced garden with high wall stand for the victory of the colonizers' aspiration to triumph over the whole Australia. Thereafter as Thornhill flourishes and as his belongings multiply on the new land he turned out to be gentleman coloniser:

The Irishman Devine had built a fine stone house for Mr. Thornhill [...]. They had named it Cobham Hall [...]. Devine was full of ways to make the place a fortress. The eminence itself was the start of it. *A hundred of the buggers could not cut you off here*, he had assured. The walls were to be of stone, half a yard thick... Cobham Hall was a gentleman's residence. (SR.314-316)

Does William succeed in his colonial project? Does he 'own' the land completely? On the contrary the inner life of William is complex and if delved into too deeply can be confronting, uncomfortable and disheartening, leading to his failure. The 100 acre land possessed by him is not so much a place that was of his state of mind, which allows readers to see what he wanted, and how or what he has achieved. The novel is scared with his thoughts- his own torments of the mind. His mind allows us the freedom to map what tortures him most. The reader can discover through William's thoughts and through a series of disagreeable occurrences that he is always being fired and haunted by the muted and also strident rhetoric of resistance from the natives. Apart from the physical confrontation with the Aborigines he felt an alarming invisible presence of them challenging his proprietary right to the land. He realized every time that 'he was sweating with the knowledge of how fragile their hold was on the place.' (171) When the whole family reached the Thornhill's place, William had a sense of enjoyment in his own 'new-coined world'. But his enjoyment was overshadowed by his experience of a black bird. The black bird watched him from its branch. He met its eye across the air that separated them. Caaaaar, it went, and waited as if he might answer. Caaaaar. He saw how cruel its curved beak was, with a hook at the end that could tear flesh. He threw up his arms and it flapped its wings, but did not leave the branch. (SR.134) The novel is scared all over with William's apprehension and even from the trees he heard 'the scrape of wood on wood and knew it to be the sound of spears being fitted by invisible hands along spear-throwers.' Interpreting all indications including of birds, trees, hills and speaking gestures of natives William heard only one language and that was, *go away* :

The man spoke loud and hard, and gestured with the hand that had slapped Thornhill. In any language, anywhere, that movement of the hand said, *go away*. Even a dog understand *go away* when he saw it. (SR. 147)

The clan of Aborigines started living on Thornhill's Point began to strip his crop of corn and thus challenging the Western concept of authority

and ownership. The massacre of killing Aborigines (by white settlers) was the conclusive action of William to retain his ownership on the land. Thornhill stamps the brand of colonial power upon the environment/land through fire and physical possession with his plough and deforestation. Much water is diverted for irrigation from the banks of Hawkesbury River by the convict-come- settlers- the river where Darug Aborigine once enjoyed swimming, playing and fishing. The name of Thornhill is a metaphor for unwanted nature- literally a 'thorny hill'. Whereas the blacks coexist with the landscape easily Thornhill is a thorny parasite on the landscape or his encounters with the land are full of thorn. At the end of the novel, the landscape itself will stand silent spectator to the massacre committed by the white settlers against the original owners of the land:

He would glance over at where river-oaks circled a patch of bare yellow earth beside the lagoon, marking where the bonfire had burned into the night. Something had happened to the dirt in that spot so that not as much as a blade of grass had grown there ever since. Nothing was written on the ground. Nor was it written on any page. But the blankness itself might tell the story to anyone who had eyes to see. (SR:325)

At last William had everything that he had ever desired. But had something in his heart he had not desired. He had an apprehension of ghostly existence of the natives who never gave up their spiritual ownership of the land. He needed the assurance of the Irishman Devine – '*A hundred of the buggers could not cut you off here*'. He had the back (hill) side of the house been stripped of every bush. 'There was nothing that a man might hide behind.' He had the black woman in his mind, the black woman 'baring her teeth at him in the gloom, the blood so bright on her skin.' He had Long Jack as a project of *penance*. Long Jack's presence repeatedly made William aware that he was an outsider/intruder. Thornhill's Point was not actually his own that he forcefully usurped a whole community from the land and at last became an *old colonialist* without a proper sense of the place. It was true that Long Jack learned a few words of English but he refused to conform to the wishes and outlook of the white settlers. He did not put their clothes on and not converted into a dependent figure of submissiveness they wished him to be. Long Jack's unyieldingness and muted assertion that he was a part of the land illustrated the meaningless pursuit of William's ownership of the land:

No, he said. | It was the first time Thornhill had ever heard him use an English word. | Jack slapped his hand on the ground so hard a puff of dust flew up and wafted away. *This me*, he said, *My place*. He smoothed the dirt with his palm so it left a patch like the scar on his head. *Sit down hereabouts*. His face closed down then and he stared into the fire. (SR.329)

And this is how he mused on his failure and the emptiness of his achievement:

He would have said he had everything a man could want. But there was an emptiness as he watched Jack's hand caressing the dirt. This was something he did not have: a place that was part of his flesh and

spirit. There was no part of the world he would keep coming back to, the way Jack did, just to feel it under him. It was as if the very dirt were consolation. (SR.329)

In the cataclysmic ending of the novel William Thornhill was represented as a 'king' and his wife as the 'queen' in their mansion with dominant sovereign power. But delving deeper in William's psyche one may find the nuances that the colonial authority failed in its aspiration to control a native landscape. Long Jack's assertion about "a place that was part of his flesh and spirit" as well as William's understandings undermine the erstwhile connotation that the continent was merely *tabula rasa* that 'simply awaited for the Europeans to inscribe meaning onto it'. The assignment that lies before the novel is to subvert the colonial connotation and understanding of the native land. It establishes that the place had already been entirely humanized by the natives who lived there. The indigenous Aborigines had shaped a culture which interpreted that landscape and filled it with meanings. The meaning that William imposed on the landscape was quite different to the natives. Built over the site of an Aboriginal rock drawing of a fish, the stone house of William was devoid of any identification with the people and their land. On the contrary it was intended to enslave the land, to indicate ownership, possession and control. It was also built to feel home - to copy the English gentleman's home. Unfortunately neither house nor garden is 'quite what Thornhill had pictured. Something was wrong with the way the pieces fitted together' (SR.329). His mansion was of unnatural growth; the thorn-hill sprouting where aborigine culture in the form of painting used to be. Its inaccessibility for the natives meant that everything within it followed a different rhythm from the rest of the land. Colonial inventions were capriciously introduced by William. During the years passed between his arrival and that of his ultimate possession, at least in colonial connotation, William was through a crisis by trouble and anxiety. At last with Long Jack's muted assertion he was brought down with a terrible shock from his visions of taming the land to a realization that who were the real owners of it. And he had 'no part of the world he would keep coming back to, the way Jack did, just to feel it under him.' He seemed to have discovered that his central and most cherished beliefs as an owner were not shared by others but were the object of hatred and persecution. The book of Grenville does not speak of William's days of glory and valour. Instead it documents his sickness, his loss of power on the land and his disastrous failure in creating Thornhill place within a native wilderness. Therefore the native voice of Aboriginal literature finds *secret* resonance in the archive of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. Australian natives have been victims of colonisation. Aborigine peoples and their landscape were brutalized and exploited by the white people, the mythic land of natives suffered humiliation in a similar fashion at the hands of the White imperialists. The land had nurtured an ancient civilization where myths from time immemorial had been part and associated with it. William's spiritual failure to triumph over the land, its psychological landscape and his distorted sense of place respond instinctively to some sinister implications for the colonialists. Grenville's history of settlement speaks of Aboriginal landscape and she un-

intentionally gives way for speaking Aborigines as well as speaking place. As she writes in *Searching for the Secret River*, a memoir about the writing of her novel *The Secret River*:

I began to realise that the Aboriginal people were emerging in a way I hadn't planned: through the description of landscape. The rocks, the trees, the river—I realised that I was often describing them in human terms—the golden flesh of the rocks beneath their dark skin, the trees gesturing, the bush watchful and alive. Humanising the landscape could be a way of showing the link between indigenous people and their land because, in some way that I recognised without really understanding, the country *was* the people. (199)

Grenville understands this *emerging* and this works behind her dedication of the novel “to the Aboriginal people of Australia, past present and future.”

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To Star

- Lata Dubey

O! Lively, lovely, lofty but little star,
You are a wonderful soul-mate of the sky.
Who keep wandering from one
Place of beauty to another.
To keep yourself filled up with warmth of life,
Of togetherness of Love and light.
To sustain yourself with the divine might
For getting, brightness, sheen and shine
Of beauty that can keep itself upright.
Amidst the turbulent phases of the heavenly spright retinue
Comprised of kings, horses.
To frighten you from being brighter and anew,
Refreshed, revived, but realized only by a few.

