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THE INVISIBLE WOUND: UNCOVERING THE HIDDEN SCARS OF CULTURAL MEMORY IN KATE GRENVILLE'S *THE SECRET RIVER*

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Abstract

This article focuses on the intertwined themes of trauma, memory, and the sacred, exploring how the novel tackles the complexity of Australia's colonial past. The violent clashes between Aboriginal Australians and British colonizers in early phases of colonialism are depicted vividly from Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River.* The story reveals deep and enduring effects of these historical events by highlighting the psychological and emotional anguish endured by both conquerors and the colonized. Through its story, the novel highlights the lasting impact of previous battles on modern society while also reflecting on how memory influences individual and community identities. The novels main source of colonial conflict is the sharp contrast between the settler's view of the land as a resource to be exploited and the Indigenous people's sacred relationship to it. The profound miscommunications and cultural gaps at the foundation of the violence are highlighted by this collision of worldviews. Ultimately, *The Secret River* provides a compelling examination of the colonialism's long-lasting wounds and the continuous attempts to make peace with this unpleasant past.

Keywords: Colonial Conflict, Trauma, Memory, Indigenous People, British settlers.

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Culture is imperative to know one's identity and self and also it is distinctive from society to society. The study of culture emphasizes on the examination of subjects like colonialism, gender, racism, and power dynamics and how these affect cultural manifestations. The notion of cultural diaspora is also introduced, denoting the dispersal, migration, or dissemination of a specific culture outside of its original cultural or physical origins. It draws attention to how resilient communities react when they face displacement issues and still manage to preserve and modify their cultural heritage. the facets of culture, cultural studies, and the cultural diaspora, discuss how they shape identity, investigate diversity, and comprehend the difficulties encountered by communities in protecting their cultural legacy across migration or separation. As Bernadette states, "Culture studies does not speak with one voice, it cannot be spoken with one voice, and I do not have one voice with which to represent it" (365).

The two main categories that make up Australia's Indigenous population are Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. Whereas Torres Strait Islanders are native to the islands that cross the strait between Cape York in Queensland and Papua New Guinea, Aborigines reside on the mainland and offshore islands. Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a shared past, their cultures are diverse. There is also a process of defining boundaries between various language groups, but not in a way that non-Aboriginal people could identify or comprehend. Australia is renowned for its distinctive flora and fauna. Devastatingly, the year 1788 saw the entrance of Europeans. Land acquisition, violence, and forced assimilation were the consequences of colonization.

In the novel, themes of conflict and cultural collide are explored as settlers struggle with issues of identity and belonging, manage complicated familial dynamics, and deal with the overwhelming force of the natural world and its surroundings. Grenville describes about the

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people's hardships provides readers with a deeper understanding of the tensions that emerge between history and culture throughout colonialism. To investigate and value the vast array of cultures, languages, and customs that exist on a global scale, as well as the ways that social identities and power structures are created, upheld, and challenged in various cultural contexts and to provide a challenging and truthful analysis of the intricate and oftentimes tense the communications between European settlers and Indigenous Australians.

Native Americans have an unbreakable bond to the environment it appears as though they are part of the rocks. Grenville portrays Indigenous presence as a constant and unwavering feature of the landscape, similar to the stones. This representation emphasizes the long-lasting nature of Indigenous people existence, which causes discomfort for white settlers, as well as the close relationships that these groups have to their land.

The Secret River by Kate Grenville is a compelling description of Australia's tense colonial past. It effectively depicts about hopes and dreams of white settlers turned into a tragic and violent reality, shedding light on the less happy periods in the history of the country. The novel offers a view into the settlers' perceptions of the Indigenous population, focusing on the cultural clash between Aboriginal Australians and European settlers. About *The Secret River* Behrendt observes that "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" (Grenville 4). *The Secret* River delves into the cultural legacy, ties to Dreamtime, and unique customs of the Aboriginal people via its story. It also emphasizes the opposition, political exclusion, and marginalization they encountered as colonial powers tried to impose their way of life.

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The narrative is based on the life of Kate Grenville's great-great-grandfather, Solomon Wiseman, a Thames boatman sent to Australia as a convict in 1806. Grenville's investigative biography, S*earching for the Secret River* (2006), provides biographical information about Wiseman's life. Wiseman overcame his problems with tenacity as he navigated foreign colonial territory, finally gaining money and social prominence. Grenville describes the critical moment when she chose to investigate Australia's colonial history and racial tensions at the Sydney Harbour Bridge Walk for Reconciliation in 2000, when she exchanged a significant gaze with an Aboriginal woman who was watching the event. This experience profoundly impacted her and motivated the creation of the novel.

> "In that instant of putting my own ancestor with this woman's ancestor, everything screwed the country, the place, my sense of myself in it ... until I knew it felt like nothing but wilful blindness-even hypocrisy to go through the symbolic motions. We were strolling towards Reconciliation what I had to do was cross the hard way, through the deep water of our history" (Grenville 13).

The story reimagines Grenville's ancestor's experiences via the figure of William Thornhill, a convicted felon who has a profound and intricate bond with the land in the Hawkesbury River area. As he nears prosperity, circumstances lead William to sadly participate in the slaughter of the nearby Indigenous tribe. Grenville's work emphasizes the complex and difficult interaction between two very different civilizations. It implies that white settlers' socio-cultural identities are not fixed, but rather changed and reshaped by the pressures and situations they face in the colonial terrain.

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The novel *The Secret River* begins with a preamble titled Strangers, which questions who the genuine strangers are Indigenous people or immigrant settlers. Both groups see the other as exotic and unfamiliar. When William Thornhill and his family arrive to the Hawkesbury River, he meets an Indigenous guy who comes from the darkness. Thornhill finds this man's unusual face and unfathomable attitude threatening. Thornhill is overcome with dread as he confronts the hard surroundings and the presence of the Indigenous guy. He feels as if he and his family have been abandoned at the outskirts of civilization.

> "It seemed at first to be the tears welling, the way the darkness moved in front of him. It took a moment to understand that the stirring was a human, as black as the air itself. His skin swallowed the light and made him not quite real, something only imagined" (Grenville 5).

He bursts into tears outside his improvised shelter for the first time since boyhood. In this scene, he is presented as a terribly alienated and dejected guy, overcome by his surroundings.

Grenville moves her focus from the Indigenous man to the Thornhill family, immersing readers in their cultural setting. She reflects the Thornhill's narrow perspective, influenced by their limited experience in their impoverished, white, English metropolitan setting. Their lives revolve on a few streets near the Thames, and William Thornhill works as a boatman on the river. Their poverty is obvious, and when they are brought to Australia, their sense of captivity only grows. Survival becomes their primary worry, and this section of the story develops empathy for the Thornhills. Even with the variety of individuals from different cultures and races in London, Grenville highlights that the Thornhill family's experiences did not equip them for meeting members of a culture as foreign to them as that of Indigenous Australians.

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Thornhill's desire for land might incur an unimaginable price. His aspiration for ownership creates friction between European settlers and the land's original stewards, the Indigenous people. The discovery of a body at this moment indicates the looming clash. While Blackwood's authentic connection with the locals is revealed later, he warns Thornhill from the beginning about the importance of maintaining a vital relationship with the local Indigenous people. "Any amount a good land, he said...I seen you looking, he said... Give a little, take a little, that's the only way. He stared out across the water, then turned and spoke close in Thornhill's face, quite calm. Otherwise, you're dead as a flea" (Grenville 110). However, colonists have little understanding of Indigenous culture or their deep connection to the land. What they don't grasp, they label as uncivilized. At first, the Thornhills see things through their own cultural prism, but as time passes, Thornhill realizes that the Indigenous way of life is not only simpler, but also more intelligent.

Sal discovers to see Indigenous people as similar to herself, and she recognizes that the property the Thornhills are attempting to acquire belongs to them legally. When Sal confronts Thornhill about leaving, he reacts angrily, raising his hand as if to harm her at a critical juncture in their relationship. Soon after, when Thornhill is called away for an emergency, Sal offers a determined demand "With or without you, Will, take your pick" (Grenville 304). This ultimatum had a significant impact on Thornhill's subsequent involvement in the terrible killing. Grenville clearly lays out the emotional and logical causes that drove Thornhill to do the heinous act of killing innocent Indigenous people.

A few decades later, in the novel's concluding section, Grenville explains the high cost the settlers paid for the massacre. On the surface, they appear to have flourished, with the settlement well-established and no additional trouble from the Indigenous people. Thornhill has constructed a fortress-like home, but the deception and brutality that underpin his success have left a deep,

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unspoken schism between him and his wife. In addition, their son Dick has left them as a result of Thornhill's conduct. His life is defined by two big changes, his separation from Dick and the irreversible harm to his relationship with his wife. Despite owning the land, he feels no true comfort or calm there.

> "He could not say why he had to go on sitting here. Only he knew that the one thing that brought him a measure of peace was to peer through the telescope. Even after the cliffs had reached the moment at sunset where they blazed gold, even after the dusk left them glowing secretively with an after-light that seemed to come from inside the rocks themselves..." (Grenville 349).

Grenville depicts Thornhill as a man who, despite his guarded home, feels no serenity. Indigenous people are ever-present, hovering like a shadowy danger, intrinsically linked to the land itself. Thornhill believes they represent his remorse and anxiety, plaguing him even when they are not present. Every day, he is haunted by longing and remorse, regardless of his wealth. Grenville emphasizes that Thornhill continues to suffer a high emotional cost for his acts against Indigenous people, unable to escape the effects of his past.

Thornhill's experience with the Darug community is a watershed moment in his life, drastically changing his perception of Aboriginal people. His story reflects on the greater convict settler experience in late 18th and early 19th century Australia, highlighting the intricate and frequently controversial relationships between settlers and Indigenous populations. Grenville uses Thornhill's journey to demonstrate how colonial narratives can acknowledge and embrace

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Indigenous people's experiences and viewpoints, contradicting the prevailing settler-focused history.

"He knew he would never share with Sal the picture of this boy. That was another thing he was going to lock away in the closed room in his memory, where he could pretend it did not exist" (Grenville 290). Thornhill, serving in the role of a colonizer, is not immune to the harshness of the prison colony, as starkly illustrated in one of the novel's most distressing and repulsive scenes at Darkey Creek. A group of Aboriginal people have been poisoned by one of the settlers. Thornhill stumbles onto the terrible scene, finds numerous deceased people on the ground, their mouths covered in a pale sticky substance caused by poisoned flour. Among the dead, he discovers a dying boy, adding to the tragedy of the situation. Thornhill is shaken by the encounter and flees to his ship, swearing never to talk of it to Sal or anyone else in an attempt to suppress and quiet the memory of what he has witnessed.

Grenville stresses Thornhill's tremendous recovery, underlining his vow to never share the recollection of the murder with anybody. Thornhill maintains mute about the horrible events after that, deepening his emotional isolation from his wife, Sal. This stillness becomes a metaphor for the Darug people's tragic memories, leaving an unspoken hole in their relationship. The hollow in the land represents the Aboriginal people's dispossession and destruction, alluding to the horrors of the past and the quiet that surrounds them. Thornhill may consider himself the ruler of his own land, but he is a genuinely tormented man. He can't shake the horrific pictures of the massacre, or the crushing sense of guilt and complicity that remain. Thornhill's mental condition remains fragmented, as he is tormented by his brutal history and incapable of coming to terms with it.

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Long Jack, the only surviving member of the Darug on the Hawkesbury River, represents the dispossessed people's ongoing trauma. Following the massacre, Jack remains on Thornhill's estate as a living memorial to the atrocity. His body, marked by the violence he both witnessed and endured, bears clear signs of trauma. Grenville employs Jack's physical condition as a powerful means to express the suffering inflicted by colonial hostility. Thornhill's portrayals of Jack's physique reflect the brutality of frontier violence and the profound despair that permeates among Aboriginal people. Jack carries not only mental scars but also physical injuries from the turmoil, which irrevocably transformed him. His injured body stands as a silent tribute to the terror, uncovering the unspoken reality of the devastation. Jack's body acts as clear evidence, exposing the suffering inflicted upon his community. Grenville's *The Secret River* provides voice to the voiceless Darug victims, whose pain continues to haunt both the nation's history and present.

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