

**Question of Identity Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* and Marilynne
Robinson's *Housekeeping***

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Abstract:

The Australian novelist, Kate Grenville, has represented the Australian history in her novel, The Secret River. She has marked the violence of the country's past. Grenville has chronicled the life of the aborigines and the culture of the early settlers in New South Wales. The regional culture of the aboriginal inhabitants is compared with the unpleasant culture of the orphans in America. Like Grenville, Marilynne Robinson, the American novelist, has portrayed America as a nation of orphans in her novel, Housekeeping. The relinquished girls in the novel are raised by a succession of relatives, who become the central characters of the plot. The moral degradation is the heightening of the orphans in the great American nation. The characters of both the novels strive for the creation of identities. The characters of Housekeeping and The Secret River climax the price of loss of life and survival. This paper focuses on the dangerous and deep undertow of transience related to identity struggles.

Keywords: Gender, identity, settlers, aborigines, abandonment, orphans.

The creation of history along with the memories of the past is the great strength of literature. It expresses collective values and elaborates the experiences of an individual. Such experiences are estimated in terms of the ordinary, the typical and the representative. It craves to represent integration than disintegration and expresses a strong ironic disapproval of collective mindlessness. Australian literature holds for indigenous Australians and for the descendants. Its perception of constituting the community is different in the two cases. The white Australian community derives its culture from settler society. It celebrates the pioneer values and the deep attachment to the land. For the aborigines, their traditional culture defines allegiances and relationships. Literature has been a way for claiming a voice and articulating a sense of cohesion as the people faced real threats in the continuance of their culture. This piece of work represents the claim of voice in *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville compared with a search of identity of the American orphans with reference to *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson, an American novelist and essayist. The above mentioned novels are elegantly

written, meticulously crafted and extremely readable. It provides a classic example of the white Australian and American anxieties. These two novels are paradigmatic of the difficulties experienced by the settler descendants of Australia and the American children after the loss of parents.

The grim truth of the colonial history that haunts the nation's conscience is *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville, an Australian author who has published fifteen books that include fiction, non-fiction and biography. She won the Orange prize for *The Idea of Perfection* in 2001 and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for *The Secret River* in 2006. She published this novel in 2005 and represented a new form of historical writing that evoked the bitterest Australian criticism. Grenville's novel intends to explore the literary tendency to re-write and re-read the political genesis, of the nation. It is a literary tendency upon the crucial moments that has dwelled in the last twenty years of the Australian colonial history. The novel focuses on the critical revision of the past, on the initial violent encounter with the aborigines and the role of familial identity. Whereas, Robinson's *Housekeeping* has its focal point on family, that helps to form identities. The definition of an individual, originates from the framework of a family. But the nation's framework gets lost when its children are deprived of the family. Identification loses its root at the absence of the stable figure in the family. The children fight their own battles to create their own identities. They shall pass around a series of guardians and struggle to connect themselves with a mother figure at the homes they connect with. The themes of the novels outlined above can be considered defamatory and has to be removed from the national consciousness.

Kate Grenville discloses the familial identity of the Australian settlers. The novel depicts the exile, alienation, failure, success, dream, desire and lifestyle of Grenville's ancestors. Her ancestors are portrayed as frontiers in the novel, *The Secret River*. The historical realities and mysteries are revealed and solved in the novel. This could be done at the knowledge, she gained from her ancestors. The realities of the settlers and their crave to create their own identities is focused in the present study. Kate Grenville's interest of writing fiction with the white and black is considered as a link. The plot occurs around the Hawkesbury region near Sydney during the 19th Century. The tragical incidents of the aborigines and their exile and alienation are the main motif of her novel. The exile and alienation of Grenville's ancestors reveals their pain and their experience of the new land, culture and people.

William Thornhill from London in England to New South Wales in Australia is the protagonist of *The Secret River*. His childhood sweetheart Sal, was his wife. He steals timber and was imprisoned in England and sent to New South Wales. He gained a hundred acres of land on the Hawkesbury River. Thornhill decided to make money to return to London but the love for the land had his settlement there. Sal did not want to be a settler and had her dream of returning to England. The Thornhills were also involved in the tensions between the immigrants and the Aboriginal residents of the region. They wanted to compromise for the sake of the settlers to have a peaceful life, in the aboriginal land. Peace resulted and permitted them to continue their dwell in the land without the fear of the natives' attack. Thornhill makes a lot of money and attempts to provide a comfortable life for Sal. He attempts to convince Sal to forget her dream. His success is impossible without a price. After the bloody dispersal of the aborigines, his younger son lets him live to his own will. He does not share any conversation with his father, Thornhill becomes permanently disabled by a gunshot. Grenville ends her novel with the image of Thornhill scanning the horizon for a glimpse of a man's shape. It symbolizes the haunting spectator of the Aborigines which hangs over the white Australians.

The main theme of this novel is the conflict between the settlers and the aborigines. The British settlers have to exist at the same place with the aborigines of Australia. They lacked in communication and understanding. The novel illustrates the unpleasant massacre of indigenous people. It's an uncovering of painful scars of the past. Grenville represents her ancestor's life style in London during the late nineteenth century and lets her readers realize their exile in New South Wales. Thornhill's childhood was in the slum of London. His friends were "all thieves, any time they got the chance" (16). Stealing was their style and entertainment. London was not the central place of settlement for Thornhill. His life, as a settler enables Grenville to describe the conflicts he encounters in a colonial landscape and environment. Thornhill should have managed with poverty and miseries instead to fight against them and making conditions worse. He could have learnt to adopt himself in a new situation, convention and culture But Sal never complains of her new situation. When Thornhill makes an effort to make his life on the new land, Sal feels homesick.

The Secret River centralizes Thornhill and his wife Sal. After having served a series of time, Thornhill manages to "take up land on Hawkesbury River" The phrase "taking up land" explores the tragical colonial life between the aborigines and the white settlers. It is the pivotal

issue around which the cultural conflicts take place. The piece of land where Thornhill builds a cabin for himself and his family belongs to the natives. It is not as he took for granted “The blank page on which a man might write a new life”(130). The place is an evidence of other lives and it is Thornhill's incapability to understand it and that leads to the culture and communal clashes. Grenville's humane depiction of the perpetrator and its background helps her readers understand the motives and circumstances of the protagonist to involve in complicity. The crises of identification, generates a thought process among the readers and instructs the way of behaviors in similar circumstances.

The concept of ‘ name’ and its connection to identity have been explored in the history of literature. William Thornhill's struggle for identity begins with his narration of his birth. Saying that, from the time, he knew his name “it seemed that the world was crowded with other William Thornhill's” (110). He feels that his name is common and has a continual feeling of being lost in the crowd of London. Such a feeling rises up to heights when his sister asserts that his “name is common as dirt” (11) He loved Sal. “He loved the way she called him Will” (19) .He loved it, because it made him feel special. The name “Will, was his own alone” (19) Grenville here highlights Thornhill to find his own identity, with the help of Sal.

The feeling for a sense of identity with Sal could not help Thornhill to find his own importance in London. His attempt to create an identity as a lighterman on the Thames River results in vain when he tries to save Sal. For the reason of stealing timber, Thornhill was sentenced to death but shipped to New South Wales along with Sal and his child in Australia; he faces a new kind of identity crisis. His life slides him a step down, from a commoner to a convict. The sense of purpose and identity infatuates Thornhill to Blackwood's (another convict) idea of owning the native's land. The land attracts him greatly and he names it “Thornhill's Point”(132).He calls it “ his own new – coined world” (134).

The “Thornhill's Point” and the protagonist's family are the residence of the self in the novel. The irony is that, they are at odds. Sal wants to escape from the “Thornhill's Point”. The protagonist notices that there are two opposing thought for handling the natives in New South Wales. For characters like Smasher, the natives are to be massacred but for characters like, Thomas Blackwood, they are to be respected and treated with kindness. Thornhill finds his identity in the middle of thoughts between Smasher and Blackwood in how he could deal with the natives. Though, he finds violence in Smasher's voice he couldn't develop a smooth relationship with the natives as Blackwood. Further, the fear for the safety of his family, draws

him into Smasher's violence against the natives. It suggests that the fear of the natives is stronger than Thornhill's dislike for violence.

'Ownership' frames Thornhill's identity in the novel. Ownership bases the conflict between the settlers and the Australian natives. This conflict develops in a variety of forms between racial groups, between individuals and within families. The English accepted that by "marking" a piece of property with their cultivated crops indicated their ownership. Whereas, the natives had a free rein of the land before Australia was claimed for England. The status of being white men (convicts) gives them permission to look down on other human beings (aborigines). Thornhill struggles himself in the treatment of the social inferior, because he was inferior in the city of London. Social hierarchy runs throughout the novel. The humiliation that the protagonist experiences as a waterman in London marks his character for life. Later, when he visits the church in New South Wales as a convict, he experiences the humiliation and makes him realize, the cruelty of being inferior. Thornhill's humiliations self creates in himself to claim the ownership. Grenville portrays Thornhill sitting on the veranda of his grand house, 'Cobham Hall', at the end of the plot.

The protagonist has created a grand identity for himself materialistically. It was his dream desired since he was a child in poverty. Such an accomplishment resulted at the cost of his family and he lost his individuality. He offered a comfortable and luxurious life to his wife Sal and his son Dick. Despite all his success, he lost even his conversations with Dick and his relationship with Sal grew apart. The unforgiving guilt for his treatment of the natives in New South Wales was the greatest cruelty. He and Sal offered help to Jack for his creation of identity in the society. Jack declared, "This me", he said, "My place" (329). Jack "... never put on the britches or the jacket ... the clothes lay out in all weathers decaying into the dirt"(328). Thornhill lost everything when he lost his Sal and Dick, because family is predominant than all wealth acclaimed. The soul and blood of a nation depends on the love that rests in its families. The fate of the children reveals the consequences of their parental deeds.

Families help form identities. The identity of any individual results from the raising and the caring of familial relationships. The focus of an individual raises from the framework of his/her family. It is the parents or the guardians who create the most lasting effect. They

spend the most of the time with their children and teach them to shape their identities. It is impossible for a child to develop its identity when a child is neglected of the relationship with the parental figure. The dilemma that arises in Marilynne Robinson's, *Housekeeping* is that, How could a child identify itself if there are no stable figures to relate to? She is best known for her thematic depiction for her novels, especially, *Housekeeping*. Lucille and Ruth are the two sisters, who lose their mother at a young age. The father figure is not mentioned and it's the familial characters that the girls pass around through a series of other guardians. The narrator, Ruth, struggles to connect with a mother figure and during this search the sisters grow apart and struggle to create their own identities. The mother – daughter relationships and the homes they connect with, frame their identities in Robinson's *Housekeeping*.

Literature often overlooks the mother/daughter relationships. Freud's oedipal complex centralizes the mother/son or father/daughter. But the development of the young girls has its strong foundation in their mother/daughter relationship. Girls imitate their mother's attitude to determine their own way into the societal standard of giving such ideas are often reflected through a feministic perspective in the texts. Trites, a critic, in his essay, *Waking Sleeping Beauty*,

The most complex form of relationship in feminist literature...seems to be the mother / daughter relationship, for that is the primary relationship for many girls. Adrienne Rich notes that the mother/daughter relationship ... 'is the great unwritten story'. She further notes that 'the loss of... the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy... (100)

The strength of the female characters is proven at the focus of such relationship and the loss of the one can have traumatic effects. The relationship between the two has powerful effects on each of their identities. The readers discover Ruth and Lucille in *Housekeeping* in such a state. Ravits, a critic, notes that

Even in mother – child relationships that are not as abruptly severed as Ruth's, we recognize a primary human pattern, feelings of regret and abandonment that inevitably accompany the individual over the course of emotional development. (647)

The young and impressionable, Ruth and Lucille are forced to face the world without their mother. They struggle to identify with a motherly character and have a tough time in finding themselves. According to Ruth, they are affected by abandonment and they develop along with it. She lists the people who have played a part in raising her and the last one, has left her in some way. The familial guardian does not match with Helen, their biological mother. She has left her daughters and committed suicide.

She put our suitcases in the screened porch..... and told us to wait quietly. Then she went back to the car and drove north almost to Tyler, where she sailed in Bernice's Ford from the top of a cliff named whiskey Rock into the blackest depth of the lake.
(22)

Ruth narrates the above mentioned with no emotions. This passive attitude continues throughout the novel. Robinson portrays, Ruth's suffering of the lack of stable parenting in her life. The continual abandonment has resulted in the emptiness and unsure of identity in Ruth's life. It was Sylvia Foster Fisher, Ruth and Lucille's eccentric and mysterious aunt, who was pleased for a new relationship with her daughters. She works to foster it and in Aldrich's opinion, "Edmund Foster's death brings a new intimacy between Sylvia and her daughters, as if finally, without the father, the daughters recover their mother"(309).

Ruth brings out the importance of motherhood through Sylvia's role in *Housekeeping*. The first part of *Housekeeping*, elaborates the reliance of the two sisters on each other for everything. They supported each other through their constant abandonment, starting from their mother, then grandmother, and with Nova and Lily -Ruth's great aunts. Ruth hardly speaks out her troubled thoughts while Lucille voices her opinions without hesitations. Ruth identifies herself through Lucille till they were close together. Their extreme personalities framed one average individual. Their survival was comfortable till they supported each other. After the death of their grandmother and the abandonment of Nona and Lily, it became usual for the girls to make connections with those who appear to take up their guardianship. A new hope arises in the young girls when Sylvia announces for the takeover of a guardianship, because the girls were informed that Sylvia resembled their mother. They hoped to find similarities with their mother. This common expectation starts to deteriorate their bond but they separate to find their own identities, being disappointed with Sylvia.

Housekeeping describes Ruth to be passive with her aunt Sylvia but Lucille resists her. The rainstorm that floods the second floor from the ground floor agitates Lucille. She begs Sylvia to venture out to find other people to socialize with. Sylvia acknowledges the loneliness of the girls but had no desire to leave her house. This incident shocked the girls. She ends her discussion with the mention of the probate court, declaring her unfit parenting. The young girls accepted the fact of Sylvia's abandonment but Ruth started to sympathize for her. Lucille works to locate the differences to separate herself from her unstable aunt. The differences between the sisters perceptions of their mother, focus on the development of their own identities. While Lucille tries to construct a motherly character within the society, Ruth tries to relate her mother with her present reality. Lucille's identity develops with Rosette Brown's mother -her economics teacher. The conflict continues until, Lucille leave the house and goes to live with her Home Economics teacher. The teacher adopts Lucille and trains her as a traditional woman by the standards of the society .Now, Lucille becomes the abandoner of Ruth and Sylvia. Ruth is ready to accept Sylvia as her mother figure. She tries to find similarity between herself and Sylvia and let go Lucille to live her own life.

Housekeeping narrates a trip that Ruth commits with Sylvia. This proves her first step of accepting an identity. Sylvia takes Ruth across the lake to visit her abandoned cabin. Shortly after their arrival, Sylvia disappears. "Sylvia was gone. She had left without a word or a sound" (153). Ruth finds herself deserted in the woods and abandoned again. She tries to find comfort in solitude after the last abandonment. Sylvia creates an opportunity for Ruth to resolve her inner crisis at her last abandonment and returns back to her daughter, Ruth. When Ruth is comfortable and back in peace, Sylvia takes up the role of a mother.

Ruth undergoes a rebirth on their journey back to Finger bone. At this moment, she admits Sylvia as her mother figure, whole heartedly. She tried to find her identity in Lucille at the beginning of the novel. She seems to acknowledge her own identity at the re-union with Sylvia. Ryan Maureen, a critic, comments "[Ruth]...is an individual standing, not alone, but together with an aunt who is also mother and sister, and with whom she affirms bonds of family" (338). Ruth morphs her identity with her family. But the Sheriff tries to take Ruth, away from Sylvia, when he hears of the unconventional trip. Ruth states, "Sylvia did not want to lose me" (195). They become a single unit, brought together by family and likeness.

Family plays a major role in *Housekeeping*. In the life of Ruth, it is one of the identical key elements. “There is remembrance and communion, altogether human and unhallowed. For families will not be broken” (194). The end of the plot, narrates Ruth’s thoughts of Lucille and she imagines of the life, at the re-union of the two sisters. The acknowledgement of Lucille, of Ruth’s priority of the family proves that the family cannot be separated. Ruth and Lucille have their own ways of accepting their motherly figure. Lucille searches it in the society and Ruth remains truthful to her family roots. The sisters reacted differently after the death of their mother. The cause of Lucille’s search for identity in the society is that she may not have a clear memory of her mother as a younger daughter. However, Ruth recognized her mother’s fault her suicide and did not permit the same with Sylvia during the time of floods. Discovering identity is the struggle of many children who lose their parents. Their struggle becomes magnified, without the prominent guidance. Missing their mother in *Housekeeping* create different journeys for the girls to undertake. It results in a comfortable destination, which can be deprived for many more in reality. The characters of *Housekeeping* are portrayed as stronger individuals but the parents should strive for a good parenting to create a beautiful life on earth. The protagonists’ ethnic identity in both the novels is focused as an expression of the continuity between one’s construal of past ancestry and future aspiration in relation to ethnicity. They do highlight the various dimension of the past and future aspirations. The families in both the novels has long been a central unit of social organization, understood as key to child development, the production of personal and familial identity, and the transmission of values.

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