

THE COLONIAL BURDEN OF THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

الحاضر في عبء الماضي الاستعماري

CHAAMI Amine⁽¹⁾

University Center of Aflou

(aminechaami87@gmail.com)

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Abstract:

The exceptionalism has been reinforced by exposing the truth behind *terra nullius*. The possession and colonization of Australia were justified by the rigorous application of the doctrine of *terra nullius*. Exposing the underlying principle of *terra nullius* is a conspicuous souvenir in the Australian history that lies beneath the modern Australian state and of the ways in which that history has sometimes been deliberately suppressed to give the impression of more dignified and honoured foundation of Australia. It is more concerned with readdressing the moment of settlement and exposing the reality behind *terra nullius* in order to deconstruct the mythic aspect of doctrine than focusing on issues which are related to the exact accuracy of events.

key words: story, terra nullius, exceptionalism,, a conspicuous souvenir

ملخص باللغة العربية:

في تاريخ الأمم ، كثيرا ما ينظر إلى عقبة التاريخ على أنها عقبة استثنائية. وذلك لأمر متعددة وأمدانها نعتج عن عصرها أو إحصائها ولتتنا نذكر منها على سبيل المثال لا الحصر تبرير امتلاك أرض أمة أخرى واستعمارها بتيرا نوليوس أي أن الأرض لا يملكها أحد فتؤخذ الأرض من أصحابها ويطردهون منها كأنهم لم يسكنوها. ولهذا فإن هذا المقال يهتم بإعادة تأطير لحظة الاستيطان وفتح الواقع وراء تلك العقبة من أجل تفكيك الجانب الظالم منها وفيها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التاريخ ، تيرا نوليوس ، الاستثنائية ، تذكّر واضح.

1. INTRODUCTION

The (hi)story of founding Australia is effusively overflown by secrets and the first meeting between Aboriginal people and European settlers is one of them. The national secret is commonly associated with shame and that is why; Australians do not seem to be proud of this secret in their history. The significance of the novel is in rewriting the history of settlement, and accordingly exposing the violent part in the story of the founding fathers. The construction of Australian history as a discourse from which events may be silenced to justify land dispossession is clearly addressed. The secret of the first encounter between the Aborigines and the convict is suppressed to give a praiseworthy souvenir for the founding fathers. It is intentionally concealed for gliding the picture of the early settlers of Australia.

2.Historic Amnesia

The secret is interrelated with the silences within the narrative about Wiseman that she had inherited from her family. Grenville interconnectes with both archival and familial silence to “The Great Australian Silence” that the anthropologist W.H. Stanner identified in 1968.It was specifically the omission of Aboriginal people from the narratives of the nation that set buried. Kate Mitchell “dramatizes the way in which Australian Aboriginal history has been passed down as a series of silences and omissions” (2010:260). The history of Aboriginal people was a missing segment in the history of Australia which was scantily written during the colonial era and that it was only with the establishment of the nation-state at the end of the nineteenth century that they were written out of Australia’s history (Macintyre and Clark,2003:43).

Grenville takes apart the lie of *terra nullius*, but the settler's description as owner is not questioned. The question is about his essential contribution in violence. The materialization of the violent "is not [...] ultimately threatened as the writing of such a text with its genuine goodwill and willingness to relive the nation's past atrocities, could be read as a signifier of even more virtue" (Kelada, 2010: 12). It is read as an admission of guilt and a request of forgiveness for the Australian's past mayhem. It concedes the existence of a different story by constructing 'a hollow in the book' but, as Gall suggests that the "recognition is a judicial position, apparently above the action of the frontier that it evaluates and describes and the creation of a space of recognition; for indigenous dispossession does not undermine the settler's possessive logic" (2008:101-2). The hollow is also strained by a different view. The choice of Kate Grenville to reinsert indigenous people in the narrative in the form of a hollow makes a privilege of the narrative which is still conversant by the knowledge produced about the other (Kelada, 2010:4). Kelada advocates that in the final pages of the novel, the legal fiction of *terra nullius* appears to be reasserted with the reference to emptiness and any suggestion of continuing of indigenous sovereignty is effectively whitewashed and reduced to a recurring hollow (2010:13).

The voice of the other is not tolerated, and therefore; there is a deficiency in founding and finding an appropriate indigenous point of view as an alternative narrative. Grenville intentionally positions herself as a white Australian writer who is conscious of her significant position and that is why, she does not appropriate the indigenous point of view. Accordingly, the indigenous characters are voiceless in the novel. Thus, the white man has the right to give the recognition for the other and who at the same time does not need the permission of the other for doing so. Grenville's intents are most likely indisputable, she continues to be ensnared in the white settler's borders of reference. The novel inhabits the space between the two. If Grenville courts the reader's empathy, it is not only by representing the traumatic events, but also by presenting the process by which the events are constantly forgotten. The novel does two things at the same time; it is the representation of what happened and how it is not passed down. It records a version of frontier conflict as well

as imagining the way in which that conflict was written out of the Australian history.

3. A Confiscation of Land and a Denial of Existence

The convicts are presented as powerless and defenseless people against the belligerent Aborigines. The Thornhills face “a hundred black men with spears, a thousand, a whole continent full of men with spears and that grim line to their mouths” (Grenville2005:8). The heroism of the early colonizers who settled the wild Hawkesbury River in defiance of the unsympathetic conditions and of the terrorization posed by the indigenous people is undoubtedly lauded by the construction and the representation of the other. It is a mission for civilizing the Aborigines who are not civilized, and often in a state of backwardness. The Aboriginal people are treated exactly in the same way as the wild beasts or birds that the settlers may find there. Their lives and their property, the nets, canoes, and weapons which represent as much labour to them as the stock and buildings of the white settler, are held by the Europeans as being at their absolute disposal (Hatt,1999:36). The early settlers of Australia were set at the top, the fittest to survive, while the Aborigines were seen to be at the bottom (Foster, 1985:53).

In *The Secret River*, the author imagines and constructs the setting for disclosing her story. Grenville outlines the legal fiction of *terra nullius* by employing all the discourses implied by the legal fiction for the sake of subverting them. The discourse of the civilizing mission and the superiority of the white race are evidently addressed as a means of justifying land dispossession and white settlement:

King George owned this whole place of New South Wales, the extent of which nobody yet knew, but what was the point of King George owning it, if it was still wild, trodden only by black men? The more civilised folk set themselves up on their pieces of land, the more

those other ones could be squeezed out. In exchange for the risk such men were willing to take, and the labour they were prepared to expend, a hundred acres of land seemed a fair thing. (Grenville2005:66).

The simplicity and the facility of taking the land from the Aborigines are accomplished and justified by applying *terra nullius*. The whole scheme for justifying *terra nullius* is firstly owning the place and naming it, and secondly showing both the settlers and the Aborigines the signs of dwelling and of farming the place. The land of Australia is not used by the Aborigines and consequently, it is not inhabited by them due to the lack of signs of agriculture: “ This was a place out of a dream, a fierce landscape of chasms and glowering cliffs and a vast unpredictable sky [...] It seemed the emptiest place in the world, too wild for any man to have made it his home” (Grenville,2005:56). However, Thornhill is conscious of the existence of the Aborigines in Australia. He is aware that Aboriginal people inhabit the land ,and “It came to him that this might look an empty place [...] This place was no more empty than a parlour in London, from which the master of the house had just stepped into the bedroom. He might not be seen, but he was there” (2005:82). And accordingly, the indigenous people are not the owners of land.

The founding fathers of Australia do not acknowledge the land as a humanized landscape. Thornhill perceives it as a vacant space and a promised land: “It was a place of promise to him now, the blank page on which a man might write a new life” (Grenville,2005:70). The importance of owning the land is remarked upon the continuous recurrence of used language: “His own.His own, by virtue of his foot standing on it” (Grenville, 2005:71). Furthermore, Grenville states: “His own air! That tree[...] his! That tussock of grass, each coarse strand haloed by the sunlight: his own! Even the mosquitoes, humming around his ears, belonged to him” (Grenville,2005:72). The use of possessive pronouns is legitimized by making a comparison between Adam on earth and Thornhill in Australia: “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” (2005:72). He is the only agent of humanity in Australia.

The struggle of the early settlers against the wilds of Australia is acclaimed through the sweat Thornhill puts into clearing and cultivating the land. The reverence of the struggle is palpable in the building of the hut: “Chopping, clearing, building, he was discovering a new William Thornhill, though: a man who could labour against wilderness until it yielded up a dwelling [...] The place was full of the sound of themselves” (Grenville, 2005:85). The construction of the hut is a sign that the place is not vacant. The civilizing mission in Australia is designated by the hut: “Once there was a hut to go into, a person became again a thing separate from the place, moving through an air of their own making” (2005:85). The hut is not a part of the place, and the hut and Thornhill are respectively the sign and the ambassador of civilization. The obligation of civilization is accentuated through a change in the perception of the landscape itself. It is no more the same landscape before the coming of the Thornhills: “The forest took on a different aspect [...] Outside the eye was confused by so many details, every leaf and grass-stalk different but each one the same. [...] the forest became something that could be looked at part by part and named” (2005:85). Australia before the coming of the Thornhills is not the same after the coming of them.

Kate Grenville evaluates the first years of settlement by rewriting the interactions between settlers and Aboriginal people. Grenville uses the legal fiction of *terra nullius* to position the panorama of settling Australia. However, she persistently undermines it by exposing the discourse of civilization and racial superiority which is employed to justify the hegemony of the white settlers over the land and the people. A sense of Australianness and belonging to Australia is mounting from this discourse. The construction of the legal fiction and the foundational myth of *terra nullius* is assured by the endurance of “*la mission civilisatrice*”¹. Grenville

¹ It is a rationale for colonization. It proposes to contribute to the spread of civilization by the westernization of indigenous people.

dismantles the discursive construction of Australia as *terra nullius* when the land is perceptibly populated.

Grenville deposits the first encounter of William with an Aborigine as a momentous meeting. It is about asserting the ownership of the land from different perspectives. The land is considered for the Aborigines as their bequest and birthright on the one hand, and it is a natural prison for the convicts on the other hand. Therefore, the first meeting goes from the bad to the worse due to the absence of communication in establishing a gulf between the two cultures. As Grenville points out:

Be off! [...]

The mouth of the black man began to move itself around sounds. As he spoke he gestured with the spear so it came and went in the darkness [...] In the fluid rush of speech. Thornhill suddenly heard words. *Be off*, the man was shouting. *Be off!* It was his own tone exactly.

This was a kind of madness, as if a dog were to bark in English

Be off, be off! (Grenville, 2005:8).

The repudiation of the demand to leave the land is vindicated by the fact that “he had been stripped of everything already: he had only the dirt under his bare feet, his small grip on this unknown place. He had nothing but that, and those helpless sleeping humans” (Grenville, 2005:8).

Thornhill has his family and the chance to create a future for them, and he do not intend “to surrender them to any naked black man” (Grenville2005:8). Both the Aborigine and William command one another to be off. The preservation of the Aborigines way of life is achieved by the

departure of convicts, and the construction of their lives is realized by taming the Aborigines and cultivating the land.

The communication between the early settlers and the Aboriginal people ends by a failure from the first encounter. They do not understand one another. Thornhill heard the sound of words and the meaning of them “evaporated into the air like steam out of a kettle. It was as if a word that had no meaning could not be heard. [...] It was as if a word that had no meaning could not be heard” (Grenville,2005:112). Grenville highlights the importance of having a common language in achieving understanding between different people. There is a comprehensible illustration of misunderstanding which is stated in the conversation between the old Aborigine and Thornhill. The old Black man makes an effort to explain the importance of the daisy yams, as he point out the tubers as edible, but Thornhill does not understand the orientation of the Black men to food. The Aborigine converses with Thornhill in vain since there is “a conversation had taken place. There had been an inquiry and an answer. But what inquiry, which answer? They stared at each other, their words between them like a wall” (Grenville,2005:104).The language as a means of communication mislays its power to facilitate communication, to transmit knowledge, if the words are not understood by both sides. The endeavour of undertaking communication between the Aborigine and the convict is a difficult exercise.

4. CONCLUSION

The founding fathers of Australia categorized themselves as the “civilized” and Indigenous peoples as the “savages”. From this institutionalized bias, a complex set of images and terminology has set Aboriginal people as an inferior people. The white settlers regard them as savages because they lead completely different lives from that of the convicts. Grenville presents the nomadic aspects of their life as hunters and gatherers:

They wandered about, naked as worms,
sheltering under an overhang of rock or a sheet
of bark. Their dwellings were no more

substantial than those of a butterfly resting on a leaf. They caught their feeds of fish, gathered a few oysters, killed a possum or two, and then moved on (Grenville2005: 51).

They do not live in houses and they do not wear clothes. They roam and kill some animals to afford food for their family and the rest of time is spent with their families. They lived a life of savagery as they “made no fields, and built no houses worth the name, roaming around with no thought for the morrow [...] In all these ways they were nothing but savages” (Grenville,2005:120). They are free from care ,and therefore they “have plenty of time left for sitting by their fires talking and laughing and stroking the chubby limbs of their babies” (2005:120). They devote a lot of time to their families and rituals. Nevertheless, the white settlers do work hard to be able to secure their families from starving. Thornhill gets up early in the morning and starts “hacking at the weeds around the corn, lugging water, chopping away at the forest that hemmed them in” (Grenville,2005:120).Thus, they neither spare energy nor time for their families.

Furthermore, the spiritual scars on the bodies of Aboriginal people are different from the ones on the convicts. The scares are signs of pain and marks of humiliation on the bodies of convicts while the ones on the Aborigine are different. It is the discourse of racial superiority which constructs the other as inferior and the self as superior: “Men came from all the streets around, cheered to watch this black insect of a man capering before them, a person lower in the order of things even than they were” (2005:51). They are also associates with savagery for example: “The spears of the blacks [...] were like the snakes or the spiders, not something that could be guarded against” (Grenville,2005:52). The Aborigines are therefore amalgamated into the hostility of the land in order to deny their ownership and their existence.

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