



*A Pre-text and a Pretext between the Past and the Present*

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**Abstract:**

The present research paper is for setting a re-examination of the past from the present. It presents the colonial history of Australia which has been omitted and erased from Australia's memory. As a postmodern historical revisionist stance, it counters the forgetting of past and contributes to complete historical understanding of the modern times in Australia. It narrates the story of colonization and uncovers some of the truth about Australia's history. It presents an alternative form of historical documentation which is not candidly bound to a faithful depiction of the past. Thereafter, it creates an liberating site for ignored history by supplanting the official (hi)story of the nation.

**Keywords:** colonial history; historical documentation; (hi)story; pretext; pre-text

## I. INTRODUCTION:

It is a disputed fact that Australian history only began with Europeans because of the ignorance of Aboriginal past and the erasing of Aboriginal prior presence. British colonization was legitimated by denying any relationship between the land of Australia and the Aboriginal population. The reality of populating the land of Australia for more than fifty thousand years trudges the Australian history with profundity and complexity. The epoch of the existence of convicts in Australia represents nothingness in comparison to the existence of Aboriginal people. That is why, the pretext of *terra nullius* is questioned and nullified.

## II. The Reality Question: Who Knows the Reality?

The Australian history was written from a colonial perspective. Therefore, historians did not offer considerable attention to the tragedy of dispossessing the Aborigines. The Aboriginal people were vanished from the pages of Australian history as they were disappeared from the inland plains of Australia. In An Introductory History of Australia which was written to elucidate what people mean when they speak about the history of Australia, Walter Murdoch states that:

They mean the history of the white people who have lived in Australia. There is good reason why we should not stretch the term to make it include the story of the dark skinned wandering tribes who hurled boomerangs and ate snakes in their native land for long ages before the arrival of the first intruders from Europe [...] The historian is concerned with Australia only as the dwelling place of white men and women, settlers from overseas. It is his business to tell us how these white folk found the land, how they settled in it, how they explored it and how they gradually made it, the Australia we know today (1917:9).

In the twentieth century, the process of recording history gave no attention to the Aboriginal occupation of the continent. The main focus of the white man in the continent of Australia was that the land was uninhabited before his coming.

The Australian pre-history has been tainted in the last decades. In 1961, it was estimated that the Aborigines had been lived in the continent for 10,000 years. From that time on, the view of ancient Australia has utterly reshaped. It is stated in the journal *World Archaeology* that:

In 1961 the oldest date was some 9000 years, by 1968 four sites older than 20,000 years were known and by the early 1970 at least two sites older than 50,000 years were accepted. For the last five years, 50,000 years has been generally agreed on as a likely limit, though a few believe that considerably greater antiquity will be rewarded (Murray and White, 1981: 257).

The colonizers came to Australia in the eighteenth century to settle: “despite Aboriginal resistance, the white invaders gradually spread across the country” (Webby, 1989:96). The more settlers arrived, the more land they needed. Therefore, the period of stability in the lives of Aborigines ends partly because the Europeans misunderstood the Aborigines and partly because they did not even consider them as human beings equal to themselves.

### **III. The Rationale of excusing the self and Accusing the Other**

The excuse of the Europeans for colonization was that the Aborigines were savages, and Australia was a no man’s land. Its “wilderness as a nature and as a euphemism for Aboriginal failure to develop a civilization” (Jensen,2005: 13-14). This notion clearly indicates the inequality of Aborigines, who were also strategically excluded from the history of Australia. As “Australian settlement histories have relegated Aboriginal histories to the margins along with non-British migrant histories and women’s histories” (Jensen, 2005:67). It is an act of eliminating the existence of the Aborigines. Therefore, they were written out of the Australian history intentionally.

Australian Aborigines have been the original landowners of the Australian landscape for over 50,000 years. In 1788, Britain took possession of the eastern half of Australia without any consideration for the original inhabitants. In the eighteenth century, the British occupation of Australia was justified by the belief that the land had been empty and they had appropriated the land as property. Elizabeth Webby points out that:

In 1770 James Cook arrived to claim the eastern part of the continent for the British Crown and name it New South Wales. He apparently did so under the impression that there were few Indigenous inhabitants and that, since these few did not use the land in the European sense of cultivating it, they did not own it (1989:7).

It was believed that “the cultivation of the soil that was the necessary badge of civilization” (McGregor,1997:2). This generated the national myth of legitimating white settlement. It further provides the colonists with the premise of a new beginning in a blank space and enables their settlement to thrive without any compensation to the original owners. In this respect, it is the whitewashing of Aboriginal history. They position Aboriginals at the peripheries of history, and thereby denying them a rightful status as the sovereign inhabitants of Australia.

The British justification for conquering Australia was the idea that these lands were uninhabited. Within a larger public discourse on imperial projects from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, maps played a major ideological role in popularizing the deceptive notion of empty space as part of larger imperial projects.

#### **IV. The Reality between Pr-text and Pretext:**

In postcolonial context, there have been a necessity for postcolonial authors to write back to colonial writers of history that have portrayed colonized people as the other of the colonizers. Accordingly, it is indispensable for postcolonial writers to oppose and correct the myths produced by colonial writers. What is necessary in writing back to the canon is the emphasis on displacing the center to the margin in order to dismantle power. Grenville’s novel presents an act of revolution and a movement of resistance in Australian literature and history. In this sense, The Secret River resists the official historical narrative that is fixed in its portrayal of a single truth of the past, in order to faithfully portray the colonial violence in the Australian continent. Grenville presents differently the Australia history by the fictionalization of history. She imagines the past and offers a narrative of settlement that is marked by authenticity. It writes back to the suppression of memory and the misrepresentation of the past.

The other version of Australian history is a history of violence and dispossession of the Aborigines in the Hawkesbury River. It is the version of an untold story. The novel re-writes the colonial history of Australia by adapting of historiographic metafiction. The novel is a fictional work with many historical references that gives readers a possible access to an imaginative past that disrupts the narratives of an accepted history. It suggests a different narrative of settlement, and exposes a (hi)story that discloses the violent act of taking the land from Aboriginal people by admitting the terrors of the past.

The dispossession of the Aboriginal people of Australia from their land is achieved by the planned massacre of the Aborigines by the settlers. It is focalized

through William Thornhill's white perspective. It is for the sake of disclosing the connivance of contemporary Australians about colonial dispossession of the Indigenous people. Thornhill's perspective contributes to the unconventional story of settlement which is suppressed from the memory of Australian people. In colonial Australia, Thornhill associates the possession of land with freedom. Land is for settlers as long as no other white man had already laid claim to it: "All a person need 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 out-stare anyone who said otherwise" (Grenville, 2005: 66). It is stated in the onset of the novel that Thornhill's dreams of property and prosperity in England are impossible to realize. In the colony of New South Wales, the dreams of property and prosperity are possible.

The thought of Aboriginal existence in Australia is absent in the mind of settlers. Thornhill's mind is obviously driven by the desire to possess and quench his thirst for land. Therefore, Aboriginal people were excluded from the human race by the colonial discourse of the British Empire. By the same token, the biased ideologies of the late eighteenth century furthered imperial domination through the power of colonial discourse that supported Eurocentric visions of blank space and empty land.

The land of Aboriginal people are dismissed in favor of the colonizers role as the dominant owner of new territory. The white settlers ignore the existence of the Aborigines. Thornhill's perspective recognizes no visible marks of previous occupancy or cultivation. He sets up borders and boundaries to proclaim his right to the land: "There were no signs that the blacks felt the place belonged to them. They had no fences that said this is mine. No house that said, this is our home. There were no, fields or flocks that said, we have put the labour of our hands into this place" (Grenville, 2005: 52). That is to say, the land of Australia is a land available for the taking.

Nevertheless, Aboriginal people cultivate crops. They farm the land, but the settlers do not recognize the farmed plots as agriculture. Additionally, when Thornhill admits reluctantly to himself that the patch of soil has been farmed, and that it is prime territory for the crops he wants to plant, he wants to take the plot for himself and uproots what the Aborigines have planted there. The novel not only foregrounds the colonial discourse by putting forward the reasons of taking up the land. If the Indigenous inhabitants of the land did not farm the land, they could not be using it, and it was much easier for the settlers to develop the doctrine of *terra nullius* and assert the ownership of the land.

The dispossession of the Aborigines is realized by the legal fiction of *terra nullius*. It is not in vain because it reduces the resistance of Aboriginal people who are dispossessed and dispersed. On the Hawkesbury River, Thornhill encounters land as “a place of promise [...] the blank page upon which a man might write a new life” (Grenville,2005:70). He establishes his presence upon the absence of the Aborigines. The colonization of Australia is legitimized by the absence of Aboriginal people.

#### **V. Conclusion:**

In short, Kate Grenville’s novel re-writes the colonial Australian history which was marked by conflict and dispossession, the taking of Aboriginal land, the devastation of their habits and traditions. Despite the presence of Aboriginal people, the British colonial authorities declared Australia as *terra nullius* which removed any legal recognition of pre-existing Indigenous tribes. From the outset, the Indigenous peoples were officially left without land. Dispossession, dispersal and marginalization of the Indigenous population were the major consequences of colonial conquest. They were not considered to own the land, and therefore Australia was considered uninhabited and settled rather. Thus, the colonization of Australia occurred under the pretext of *terra nullius*. The white Europeans took the burden of writing the history of Australia. They set Australia as *terra nullius*. When the domination of the colonizers ended, the representation of Australia as a land without people has remained. Therefore, the novel re-writes the European historical and fictional record of the Australian history by offering a new version which is written from the perspective of the colonized rather than that of the hegemonic power.

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