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Myths of Imperialistic Pioneer and Traumatic Past: Exploring Otherness in Neo-Victorian Realm in Kate Grenville's The Secret River.

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ABSTRACT

This research paper argues how the imperialistic nuances set to form a subjective slavery within nation and prompts to exert the racial domination over the indigenous people by the white subjects, even by those who are lower in socio-economic standing. It attempts to confront the social and cultural phenomenon that championing the exclusion of suppressed group in terms of economy, race, and class from the Neo-Victorian context lens. The paper elaborates on the process of imperial canonization which generates the 'performative exclusivity' and estrangement by silencing those who occupies the powerless position within the social and political realm. It elucidates the interplay between the plotting of neglection in relation to the class and racial consciousness and counter-narratives to the notion of stereotyping which acts with a tendency defined by collective narcissism. This paper analyses how the unfortunate past of a specific class group encourages them to violate the boundaries of the other one. It emphasizes how the economic subjugation of inferior mortals shapes the mutilation of their moral relativities inciting the concern of racial prejudices. The paper explores Neo-Victorian social background and its challenging identity politics that shows a reference point to the chaos happened due to the economic instability in England and ensued colonial impacts in Australia. The effort to revisit the Neo-Victorian social history bridges the gap in understanding the problematizing relations between upper class and lower class, and colonizers and colonized

Keywords: Neo-Victorian age, Marginalized, Power politics, Discrimination, Domination

INTRODUCTION

Neo-Victorian period is known for its literary meditation and intellectual inquiry into the historical persuasions of the age. It is designated to highlight the moment of trauma, catastrophe hidden behind the glorifying portrayal of imperialistic pioneers whose reputation founded on their self-exaggeration as a power-bearer with no trace of their real conditions in their home. The evolution of Colonial Empires during the nineteenth century paves the way for the interconnections of the past traumas happened between the British and Britain's colonial contexts. It is also commonly found that the Neo-Victorian fiction has a peculiar interest in calling attention to the "interconnections between acts of aggravated historical violence and their long-term cultural and political aftershocks still resonating well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (Kohlke and Gutleben 3). The Neo-Victorian fiction reflects not only the tales of success and victory but also unveils the history of suffering, injustice and the age's disorderliness with a hint of relevance to the contemporary time. It questions the reliability of the historical narratives as well it functions to execute the moral duties for the coming generations with a desire to resolve the ethno-political and intercultural disputes.

Neo-Victorian fiction also serves as the memory texts. Kate Grenville in her novel *The Secret River* discusses the experiences of the convicts who acts with longingness to excel beyond their horrifying past. Grenville emphasizes the fact that how their nostalgic moments attached to home drives them to rebuild their present so as to augment all the possibilities to renovate the

future for themselves and their family. The truth is, as Kate Grenville proclaims in his novel *The Secret* River, not all displacement fosters homesickness. Rather, some would harvest a deep fancy to eradicate the memories of the unfortunate events in the past. William Thornhill, the protagonist who was once the ex-convict, rebuilds his identity as a landlord after being transported to Australia. He positions himself as the colonizer against the native people despite his terrible past. William Thornhill takes the initiative to bring into the play the hegemonic strategies with what Edward Said in *Orientalism* calls '*positional* superiority' grounding on the idea of identifying himself as ""us" Europeans as against all "those" – the indigenous people, non-Europeans" (7).

During the Neo-Victorian age, the focus has turned to the re-enactment and re-engagement with the materials of history, a discourse on the race and class in postcolonial contexts with the emergence of genre such as historiographic metafiction and neo-historical novel that appears to be built through the imperial ideology and social hierarchies. Kate Grenville observes Western settlers utilize material possessions as significant markers to delineate spaces as their own represented by the boundaries. Grenville made deliberate references to the unwavering efforts of the white have-nots striving endlessly on their plot of land. The white have-nots with their strenuous effort of rebuilding their future are perceived as the victims whom Rebecca Weaver-Hightower thinks are deserving the land and they are pathetic souls who "each a "poor man that had not a rood of land in his own country"" (127). Even after William Thornhill's years of punishment as a slave labourer has been completed, he does not think of going home back but to set his business and own a piece of land in the new place that "he would be able to stand on that point of land and know it was his" (*The Secret River* 121).

On the other hand, in the novel *The Secret River*, Grenville acknowledges the Western tradition of employing the forcible means of imperial governance and occupation in Australia on the name of settlements are eclipsed by the fabricated map of exploration, and a journey of taming the native wilderness with a noble vision. Grenville represents the imperial consciousness exerts their chief interest of economic and political expansionism overlaid with the civilized mission which "has often neglected Europe's aggressive colonial and imperial ventures as models, inspirations, and testing grounds for modes of social discipline" (Mary Louise Pratt 36). Grenville sheds light on the view of imperial propaganda that dismissed the legal possessions of Australian aboriginal people over their land. With the systematic privileges reinforced by the theory of occupancy, the settlers are curious and determined presenting an argument that "unless a people tilled the soil it was a wasteland that belonged to no one in particular and so could be acquired by someone else simply by taking it" (Bain Atwood 2). On Dec 5, 1838, *The Sydney Herald* (1838) states that the permanent property rights are derived from the sanction of society, that is, by the legal governance. William Thornhill, protagonist of the novel, *The Secret River* affirms the prime tendency of the settlers thinking as though the Australian land is 'belonging to none' through his ambitious words, "All a person need 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" (125). Kate Grenville highlights how the settlers assert their political power in reasoning their right to possessing the land in Australia and they evades their moral responsibility towards dispossessing the native people of their land declaring that the native people have no private ownership of the land. The white settlers negotiate the issue of land dispossession stating that the indigenous people are just occupants not the owners. When the novel begins, it has been addressed that William Thornhill along with other convicts is sent to "His Majesty's penal colony of New South Wales" (*The Secret River* 3). It asserts how the Britain's Royal has taken control over the Australian territory. And Thornhill's quest for possessing the land with which he tends to establish his identity as a landowner is clearly conveyed as he bent down and makes some marks on the land claiming, "This mine now. Thornhill's place" (*The Secret River* 203).

The Neo-Victorianism is an academic and literary notion strongly embedded with "political aims of postmodernism" and encapsulates the "lost voices and texts" (Elizabeth Ho 7). The critical inquiry of neo-historical novel is characterized by its commitment to the "cultural mores of the period it revisits" (Elodie Rousselot 2). Neo-historical fictions strike a well-balance betwixt, as it appear in the lecture of Rousselot, "the dangers of retreating into senstionalised version of the past" and as she explores through her intellectual inquiry that it "not only seeks to expose past wrongs and omissions of the historical record, but also to problematize the participation of the present itself in these returns to the past" (11-12). The growth of Neo-Victorian novel ensures its obligation to the genre, neo-historical fiction in the means of borrowing the sources from the past as memory texts and having the commitment to address the needs of and give voices to the specific group of people. It vocalizes the issues of exclusion of minority who struggles to attain the position in shaping their societal and political structures positively. Generally, the representation of 'Other' involves with a concern to maintain the power relations and also continues to receive negative response from the members of the social and political marginalization trials. So, reconstructing both the depiction of history and representations structured on Western assumptions carries the significance. One Aboriginal member of the committee engaged in community-based research at the University of Adelaide says with a sense of exasperation, "We are tired of being researched; we want to be in the research ourselves, to have a say in what needs to be studied" (Fay Gale 130). The above lines, not only culminates in representing the native people's struggles for equitability but also concerns the challenges of all underprivileged groups regardless of gender, race, and class. Grenville captures the outsider, that is the settlers' assumptions about the natives and their ways of life proclaiming that the indigenous people are uncivilized without any concern of future as Thornhill look at the patch of dirt and says, " … like children, they did not plant today so that they could eat tomorrow. It was why they were called savages" (*The Secret River* 146).

Kate Grenville in her novel, *The Secret River* challenges the pioneer image of the Western convicts like William Thornhill

and highlights their terrifying past of utmost poverty and impoverishment. Thornhill and his family has dwelled in poverty in Britain and has been frequently involved in crimes of stealing, "They were all thieves, any time they got the chance" (16). Thornhill expresses his frustration for having transported to a foreign isolated land, Australia in the lines, "There were things worse than dying; life had taught him that. Being here in New South Wales might be one of them" (*The Secret River* 5). Like a serpent sheds its skin for it is no longer fulfills what the present condition demands, an individual or group attempts to reimaging their identity by reversing unfortunate social standing as a result of worst past. Thus, the protagonist Thornhill is both a victim and victimizer, subjugated and emancipated which resemble the alternative self-image of the character Eliza Lynch in *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*. Maeve Tynan describes Eliza's twisting personalities of being "both victim of and complicit in her status as sex object, being both controlled and controlling, manipulated and manipulating" (55).

Ironically, violence has been considered as a political agency to establish the order when it comes to ethno/national/global politics with a positive connotation. However, the means of exercising the violence takes various shapes that embraces the technique of 'selective exclusion' and 'forceful dispossession'. Kate Grenville, in *The Secret* River, explains that the spheres of social structures and its institutions are implicitly violent like the racial ideological law, 'apartheid' which is fueled to operate through the prescribed "seperateness, created disjunctions, and affirmed and exacerbated social gaps" (Zuzana Luckay 83). Smasher visits the place of Thornhill in *The Secret* River and comforts Sal, "I got three guns, he said. Loaded ready to shoot any black arse comes near the place" (163). Grenville draws attention to the fact that how oppressive segregation in the society breeds hatred, conflict and hierarchy between different social and communal groups. The convicts from Britain are transported to Australia experiences an exile and the indigenous people of Australia have subjected to racial discrimination and subjugation. Even today, the explicit enforcements of those violence have been apparently seem to be in no longer use, they are never totally ceased.

This paper examines the doctrines of social and political subjugation in all its various dimensions encompassing the issue of marginalization, stigmatized social identity, and dispossession over the economically inferior cum white convicts who suffer exile and the Australian indigenous people for their struggles to maintain their position as the rightful owners of their land as well their way of life. It provides a comprehensive view of the representations in neo-historical novel framed within the Neo-Victorian context and has a postcolonial reference through the critical inquiry of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. Marie-Luise Kohlke, the founding editor of Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies states that the Neo-Victorianism is "the afterlife of the nineteenth century in the cultural imaginary" (Miss Jessica Rose). This article discusses how Grenville in *The Secret River*, a postcolonial neo-Victorian text, artistically portrays the inter-racial conflicts and the exclusion takes place because of the crimes due to the deprivation of economic sources by the relocation of the convicts into the new land, Australia from Britain as well as the displacement of the Australian natives by the settlers through the family history of William Thornhill

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