

## ECOCULTURAL STUDY ON KATE GRENVILLE'S *THE SECRET RIVER*

**E.G.Jithin Jenner**

Research Scholar, Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli

**Dr.K.Kaviarasu**

Assistant Professor of English, Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli

### Abstract

Literature is known as the art of life. It a collection of academic writing in relation to verse, drama, novel, short stories and other narrative writing. The local or regional literature focus upon the character, dialect, culture, tradition and behavior of a particular group of people or in relation to a specific religion. The regional literature concentrates upon the facts of nature and the human environment within a particular locale. *The Secret River* is a historical novel about the native people of Australia. Grenville present this novel to the past, present and future people of Australia. She portrays the culture of aborigines as a lost idyll. This novel shows how the aborigines have a deep attachment to their land and how they leave the land to the settlers. These new people of different culture make the land nasty and thus the pure nature of the land was destroyed. This paper is an attempt to find the cause for the destruction of nature in relation with the culture of the aborigines. This paper clearly demarks the aboriginal culture and the western culture. This article portrays how the nature of Australia was destroyed by the human culture. It tries to prove that the change in human culture is the only defect for the destruction of nature and thus the nature also changes.

**Keywords:** Culture, Nature, Cultural Ecology, River, Aborigines, Australia

Literature is known description of history about a particular society and people about their culture and tradition. It a collection of academic writing in relation to verse, drama, novel, short stories and other narrative writing. Literature is one of the best ways to share our thoughts, facts and ideas through stories both in fiction and non-fiction. Literature is significant because it provides us knowledge, entertainment, and artwork. It allows us to enjoy the stories that are different from reality. Writing literature is a shape of expressing the emotion. It reflects the person's existence and his reviews. Literature comes with numerous categories. It poses a view of the society, the way of life and existence style. The local or regional literature focus upon the character, dialect, culture, tradition and behavior of a particular group of people or in relation to a specific religion. The regional literature concentrates upon the facts of nature and the human environment within a particular locale. Literature brings an insight of the lifestyle and culture of the people. This can be found out in many regional literatures such as commonwealth literature, postcolonial literature and even in postmodern literature where it spoke about the lost culture of the native people of a particular land. This type of works are found in Australian, African, Caribbean and Canadian literatures.

Australian literature voice out the cultural identity of the aboriginal people. It describes the past nature of the land and the people who lived during that period of time. In the poem "Australia", A. D. Hope spoke about the landscape of Australia and in the poem "No More Boomerang", Oodgeroo Noonuccal spoke about the life

style of the aboriginal people of Australia. This poem also explains the Australian aboriginal culture and the old traditions which the native people follows. The theme of Australian literature revolves around the cultural life of the aboriginal people and the destruction of nature by the settlers who conquered the land.

*The Secret River* is a novel written by Kate Grenville. She was born on 14 October 1950 in Sydney, Australia. She has published fifteen books - nine books in fiction, four books about writing process and two books in non-fiction. In 1985 her first novel *Lilian's Story* was published. Grenville's best known works are *The Secret River*, *The Idea of Perfection*, *The Lieutenant and Lilian's Story*. *The Secret River* is a novel published in 2005, which has won the Commonwealth Prize for Literature and the Christina Stead Prize. It was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Miles Franklin Award. *The Secret River* has become an international best-seller and it was translated into many languages all over the world. This novel is dedicated to the people of Australia: Past, Present and Future. The novel sets the background of nineteenth century Australia. This novel shows how the aborigines survive to live in their own land, it also describes the dismantle of nature by the colonizers.

According to the theory of ecocriticism, it is merely "a study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). It is also said to be the study of nature and cultural artefacts of the human environment. It is claimed that the westerners have the profession to redraw the boundaries and they remap it for their

convenience. This is because they get into the wild part of nature and they occupy it for their life source, thus nature is being destroyed.

In this novel *The Secret River* Grenville beautifully describes how the nature is affected on the westerner's entry. This novel is a historical novel that thoroughly deals with the nature and culture of Australia. William Thornhill is a primary character in the novel, who lives in London. He is from a poor background. The whole family of William engages in theft for some food for their survival. William and his brother Rob and James join along with the local gangs and they steal something to eat or sell. This activity can be found in most of the low-class people of London. Their duty job is to steal something and they sell. Thus, the country is filled with thieves and so all the prisons in London got filled. This is the reason the convicts are sent to New South Wales as prisoners, because Australia is surrounded by water on all sides and the land lacks in human life. The land was surrounded with forest for miles. According to Barry this type of land is known as the area of Wilderness. This wilderness is affected by the increase in population and human culture. This inhabited land is polluted by the European settlers and the forests are cut off for their own use. According to Barry, the nature and culture are in co-existence where the first area of wilderness is turned into scenic sublime, this was because of the human inhabitation. Ecocriticism is considered to be a "matter of relationship between culture and nature" (Barry 243). Australia is the place where the land is surrounded with forests, lakes, mountains and oceans. The wild nature such as ocean, mountain and forests are explored by Europeans for their settlement. These explorations are done by humans to find themselves in a new place. The aboriginal initiate goes into the forest for their native life source.

William and his family were sent to New South Wales as prisoners. The land was dark and wild surrounded by forest and water on all sides, so they cannot escape from the land. The nature of the land was portrayed in the beginning of the novel, that the land was wild and the house where William stayed doesn't have any door. William listens to the foreign voices of the land and from the forest he hears some strange sounds. At night William encounters a man, who is a native Australian. He appears in front of William with an angry face and he has a spear in his hand. This spear is a weapon used by the aborigines for hunting. William was confident that he will not give up to any black man. Here comes the native culture, where the

aborigines are very much angry that they wanted to fight for their land. They are very rude they have a spear in their hand which is a hunting weapon. William does not know the aboriginal language he just said "be off!" (Grenville 05). The man also repeated the same. Thus, language becomes a great barrier between the settlers and the aborigines. William works as a waterman in Mr. King's transporting along Hawkesbury River. Later William joins with Thomas Blackwood, who has a solid boat, which he uses for the transport from Sydney to the Settlement along Hawkesbury River. This river serves as a life source for William. On the way of journey William was amazed to see the natural beauty of the areas. He saw the natural beauty of the land and he secretly named it as Thornhill's Point. He dreams to own the piece of land. There William tent to see a violent relationship between the aborigines and the settlers.

The native culture of the people can be found in the novel. As the boat enters the mouth of the river, William found a smoke from the aboriginal camp, this is because they are passing a message of the arrival of the members of their clan up the river. This shows the culture of the people and the signal they pass through. The culture of the settlers in the camp is so violent then the aborigines. William met Smasher Sullivan, a settler on Hawkesbury, who faces the aborigines so violently. Smasher is a one who kills each and every aborigine who enters his clan. This shows the rude culture of the settlers. After four years William got full pardon. He borrowed some money from Mr. King and bought the boat from Blackwood. This boat and river are the life-giving source for William's family and he thus wanted to claim Thornhill's point as his own.

William, Sal and their children arrived at Thornhill's point. They claim hundred acres of land for their own. At the first night of their stay, William and the boys build a shelter and they start a fire. Sal found the wilderness of the land. They clear the forest for their life source. This is because of the fact that for a perfected life style the settlers destroy the forest and they explored the wilderness. Thus, deconstruction is changed into self-construction. This existence shows the difference between the aboriginal culture and the western culture. The aborigines live along with nature, they praise nature and protect them. But when culture develops the natural resources are being destroyed. Thus, the western culture came into progress who goes deep into wilderness for their life source thus nature is totally destroyed. According to Barry this nature and cultural form can be distinguished into four stages. The first area is known as 'the wilderness'. The second is 'the

scenic sublime'. The third area is 'the countryside'. The last and final area is 'the domestic picturesque'. The wilderness is the area which belong to uninhibited continents. This area is called as 'pure' nature and when it comes to the fourth stage it clearly changes to 'culture'. "Of course, the wilderness is affected by global warming, which is culture, and gardens depend on sunlight, which is a natural force, but neither concept ('nature' or 'Culture') is thereby invalidated" (Barry 246). The middle areas contain a large element of both culture and nature. The area of wilderness is exploited by human population and it is transformed into a new area of construction. William and his family went into the wilderness and thus they clear the forest for farming. This type of human behavior in the area of wilderness can be found in the Bible. Moses ascend the mountain for receiving God's commandments. Moses also separate the ocean and made a path for the Israelites to pass through. Christ went deep into the wilderness to pray. As the same way the aborigines and the settlers walk into the wilderness for their life and hunting. This cultural change of the people changes the nature, which is viewed in the concept of "anthropocentric" (Barry 248). It is commonly known as a human-centered, where human is at the center surrounded by nature and their culture. In this anthropocentric concept human destroys nature for his greed and need. Once again this is a development of culture.

William and his boys made a corn plantation along the river. Each day Sal makes a mark on the trees, which she used to count days for the five year plan until they return to London. Gradually William covers the land with this corn plantation. He explores the upper ridge of their clan. The aborigines notices each and every move of William. The settlers always have a bad view upon the blacks and they rail them. The settlements along Hawkesbury has been joined by townships filled with soldiers. As more settlers arrives in the area the conflicts and the fight with the aboriginal people rises. William's second son Dick loves nature and he wanted to explore the river and the forest. Dick plays with the aboriginal children, swimming in river naked like savages. This shows how the next generation mingles the culture, they have no greed within them. But William warned Dick for playing with the aborigines. This is the point where the poison is inserted. Thus, on further development the people become greed and they destroy nature. Thus the wilderness is affected. An aborigine man shows the children how to create fire by rubbing two sticks together. William and Dick amazed to see the first spark of

fire. William and the other westerners use flint or match to light up fire. William advices Dick not to mingle with any aborigine child. Sal explains to William that the nature around Thornhill point was Dick's own playing ground. One day William find Dick in the forest trying to light up fire using two sticks. This shows how nature is a part of every culture. The principal of ecology is "adaptation to environment" (Steward 322). One should always adopt with nature. Nature is the only life giving source more than decades. But due to the development of culture and technology nature is looked as a material and they are destroyed for self-purpose. Thus, in Australia the vast beauty of nature was unseen after the settlement of the westerners they cleared most of the forest for their settlement.

The novel *The Secret River* shows how the culture of the settlers' changes as they came to a new land and it also shows the cultural change of the aborigines. The country is wild in nature, but after the settlement of the westerners it changes to the area of scenic sublime and later it changes to countryside. This change in nature can be viewed through the concept of ecocriticism. This paper proved that how the culture of the people brought a great effect in the change in nature. The aborigines love towards nature is seen in this novel. Their culture always deals with natural sources. Their way of life seems to be a native one. The aborigines use to rub two sticks together to start the fire this was showed in the novel, when William and Dick watch them they got surprised and they tried that too. The aborigines hunt animals with their spear for food. The aboriginal Australian's hunt Kangaroos for meat and they cook them. This is because the settlers demolish the yams, which the aborigines used as a food. The settlers clear the yams and they planted corns. Thus, the aborigines started to hunt for food. The change among the aborigine culture brings the change in nature. If we disturb nature, the nature will destruct us. The nature of Australia is thus turned to 'the countryside' from the area of 'wilderness'. But now the land changed to domesticated land which in ecocritical term called as 'domestic picturesque'. Thus, the people exploit nature for their use and later they understood the necessity of nature and started constructing nature artificially with parks, gardens and lanes. This is a great defect in nature and they are deconstructed. This paper thus proves the reflection of culture in nature's change.

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