Women At the Edges of Empire: Gendered Representation in Kate Grenville's Colonial Trilogy

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***Abstract*—This article delves into the gendered portrayals in Kate Grenville's colonial trilogy, *The Secret River, The Lieutenant, and Sarah Thornhill* and explores how women are positioned in colonial historiography. Traditionally, narratives of Australian settlement have primarily focused on masculine aspects like exploration, conquest, settlement, and dispossession. However, Grenville's novels put forth the female experiences as part of colonization. Using postcolonial feminist theories, this article examines how Grenville has taken women out of their secondary roles as homemakers and given them a position in the colonial expansion.**

This article studies the female characters as the representation of each side, showing their emotional and moral struggles that are often covered up by the official historical account. In fact, it also looks at transitioning a home into a political place where the colonial possession is justified through the everyday activities of the settlement and the feeling of belonging. Focusing on the women's roles as witnesses, caregivers, and storytellers, the article portrays how gender controls the frontier story by rewriting the hero myths of the empire and reflecting the ethical conflict behind the violence of the settler colonies.

The paper argues that Grenville's reworking of historical colonies challenges patriarchal historiography by giving primacy to emotions, recollections, and moral awareness. By using gendered lenses, her fiction lays the foundation as a challenging moral terrain which, in turn, adds to the ongoing discussions about history, gender, and national identity in the current Australian literature.

***Index Terms*—Postcolonial feminist, colonial possession, national identity, and Australia fiction.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The rewriting of colonial history has emerged as a significant concern in contemporary Australian literature, particularly in narratives that interrogate the silences embedded within imperial historiography. Traditional accounts of Australian settlement have primarily focused on masculine experiences of exploration, conquest, and nation-building, thereby marginalizing women's roles within the historical construction of the nation. Feminist and postcolonial scholarship has increasingly challenged such androcentric narratives by foregrounding alternative modes of historical remembering that emphasize affect, domestic experience, and ethical witnessing. Within this critical landscape, the fiction of Kate Grenville occupies a crucial position for its narration of the moral and emotional complexities of settler colonialism.

Grenville's colonial trilogy—*The Secret River* (2005), *The Lieutenant* (2008), and *Sarah Thornhill* (2011)—revisits Australia's colonial past not through heroic narratives of expansion but through life narratives and histories shaped by uncertainty, guilt, and negotiation. Rather than presenting colonisation as a linear narrative of progress, these novels reveal how imperial authority permeates everyday life, particularly within familial and domestic spaces traditionally associated with women. By foregrounding female perspectives, Grenville reorients colonial storytelling toward those positioned at the margins of official history, allowing women to emerge as observers, mediators, and major characters of frontier violence.

The frontier in Australian literature majorly depicts the picture of men. Men as stockman, the convict, the explorer creating his way through the bush. Depicting a man's physical conquest. But in her Colonial Trilogy, Kate Grenville suggests that the true, complicated heart of the empire wasn't found in the battles over territory, but in the domestic spaces where women lived and worked. Grenville portrays women as not just passive followers of men, as they were the glue holding the fragile colonial experiment together, often

at great personal cost. The "edginess" in the title refers to the women who existed on the perimeter of the official historical record, yet they were central to the emotional and psychological reality of colonization.

Despite extensive critical attention to Grenville's engagement with settler–Indigenous relations and historical narrative, comparatively less scholarly focus has been placed on how gender operates as a structuring principle in her reconstruction of colonial memory. This article addresses that gap by examining the gendered representations embedded within Grenville's trilogy and investigating how female characters reshape colonial historiography through mediation, domestic negotiation, and witnessing. The article argues that Grenville relocates women from passive participants in empire to central figures through whom the moral contradictions of settlement become visible.

By analysing the intersection of gender, space, and historical memory, this paper demonstrates that Grenville's fiction challenges patriarchal narratives of empire and reimagines the colonial frontier as a contested moral terrain shaped by gendered consciousness. In doing so, the trilogy contributes to broader debates concerning feminist historiography, settler colonial ethics, and the reconfiguration of national identity in contemporary Australian writing

II. GRENVILLE'S REPOSITIONING OF WOMEN WITHIN COLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

Kate Grenville challenges traditional colonial historiography, which largely privileges male explorers, settlers, and imperial authority figures, by relocating women from the margins of recorded history to the centre of historical experience. In novels such as *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant*, and *Sarah Thornhill*, women are not portrayed as passive companions but as emotional, ethical, and cultural witnesses to settlement.

Grenville reconstructs history through everyday female perspectives as wives, daughters, and observers—whose experiences reveal the psychological and moral consequences of colonisation often absent in official archives. By foregrounding characters like Sal Thornhill and Sarah, Grenville exposes how colonial expansion was negotiated within families and domestic life rather than solely through masculine conquest narratives. Thus, women become alternative historians whose memories contest imperial triumphalism and reveal suppressed violence.

III. FEMALE CHARACTERS AS MEDIATORS BETWEEN SETTLER AND INDIGENOUS WORLDS

Female characters frequently occupy liminal positions between settler society and Indigenous presence. Unlike male settlers driven by land ownership and economic survival, women often respond through empathy, fear, curiosity, or moral hesitation. Sal Thornhill's discomfort with dispossession and Sarah Thornhill's growing awareness of Aboriginal suffering demonstrate how women perceive Indigenous humanity beyond colonial binaries. Their roles as mothers and caregivers foster relational rather than territorial understandings of land.

Even when constrained by colonial ideology, these women function as emotional intermediaries, sensing ethical conflict before male characters acknowledge it. Grenville therefore uses women as mediating figures who expose the fragility of settler legitimacy and highlight possibilities of cross-cultural recognition, though often tragically unrealized.

IV. DOMESTIC SPACES BECOME COLONIAL SPACES

Grenville collapses the distinction between private and public spheres by showing that colonial power operates within homes, marriages, and family structures. Settler houses, farms, kitchens, and gardens symbolize possession of Indigenous land and the normalization of invasion.

The establishment of the Thornhill home on Dharug land transforms domestic security into an act of territorial claim. Women's labour—cooking, nurturing, organizing households—unintentionally stabilizes colonial occupation. The home becomes a microcosm of empire where ownership, belonging, and exclusion are rehearsed daily. Domesticity therefore functions politically: it legitimizes settlement by converting contested land into "home."

The Secret River

In *The Secret River*, Grenville situates Sal Thornhill within the domestic and emotional landscape of colonial settlement, positioning her as a critical

observer of William Thornhill's growing obsession with land ownership. While William views the Hawkesbury River as an opportunity for economic advancement and social mobility, Sal initially perceives the land through the lens of displacement and uncertainty. Her discomfort when encountering the Aboriginal inhabitants signals a moral unease that contrasts with William's gradual acceptance of settler violence. The space that Sal shares is through cooking, child-rearing, and maintaining the household. This symbolizes the transformation of contested Indigenous land into a site of settler belonging. However, this process is marked by emotional tension, as Sal's awareness of the land's prior inhabitants prevents the complete normalization of colonial possession. Through Sal's perspective, Grenville reveals how women participate in the creation of settler domesticity while simultaneously embodying the ethical contradictions of colonization.

Sal Thornhill in *The Secret River* becomes an embodiment of the typical working-class English woman who is suddenly put in a completely foreign setting. In fact, Sal is the keeper of the past. Her obsession over "a loaf of bread, a proper loaf" is far from an ordinary grumble; it is a frantic effort to cling to a British way of life in a country that almost seems to take delight in throwing it overboard.

Grenville presents Sal, unlike William who wants to conquer the land, as the one who survives it. Through Sal, Grenville illustrates that the colonization of Australia was not only laying claim to land but was essentially a violent uprooting of an entire culture. Sal not having a voice in the historical annals is exactly why she epitomizes the power of the modern writer; she stands for the millions of women whose existence was a continuous grind of the "making do" on the frontier of the known world.

The Lieutenant

In *The Lieutenant*, Grenville explores gender and mediation through the subtle dynamics surrounding Daniel Rooke's relationship with the Aboriginal girl Tagaran. Although the novel primarily follows Rooke's intellectual and linguistic curiosity, female presence in the narrative complicates the colonial structure of knowledge and authority. Tagaran's willingness to teach Rooke her language disrupts the hierarchical power relations of empire by establishing a momentary space of reciprocity rather than domination. This interaction demonstrates how communication, rather than conquest, becomes a means of cross-cultural engagement. The gendered dimension of this exchange lies in Tagaran's role as both cultural informant and symbolic bridge between Indigenous knowledge systems and colonial curiosity. Grenville thereby destabilizes the imperial logic that frames Indigenous subjects solely as objects of observation. Instead, Tagaran's linguistic agency transforms the colonial encounter into an ethical and relational process, revealing the fragility of imperial authority when confronted with Indigenous presence and feminine mediation.

Rooke in The Lieutenant gives a nuanced, almost a gender-bending twist to the feminine role if Sal epitomizes the physical tussle of the colonial female. Rooke is definitely a male character, but his narrative role is such that he takes on the characteristics of the feminine domain of the colonial period. He is a thinker; an observer, a recorder, a communicator. In the overly masculine setting of the First Fleet, characterized by marines who are defined through their aggression and dominance, Rooke's sensitivity makes him stand out as the "other".

Sarah Thornhill

Sarah Thornhill deepens Grenville's exploration of gendered memory by shifting the narrative perspective to a female voice that retrospectively interprets the legacy of frontier violence. As the daughter of William and Sal Thornhill, Sarah grows up within a settler household that appears stable yet is haunted by an unspoken past. Her gradual discovery of the massacre of Aboriginal people committed by her father and other settlers transforms the narrative into a process of moral awakening. Unlike the male characters who justify the violence as a necessity for survival, Sarah confronts the emotional and ethical consequences of this historical act. Her narration functions as a form of testimonial remembrance, bringing suppressed colonial violence into narrative visibility. Through Sarah's reflective voice, Grenville reconstructs colonial history not as heroic settlement but as a traumatic inheritance that subsequent generations must confront. In this way, female narration becomes a crucial mechanism through which colonial memory is questioned and ethically reassessed.

The final part of the trilogy is Sarah Thornhill, maybe the most direct reflection of the long-lasting effects of

colonial gender roles. Sarah is a child of the empire, a person who was born into a world that was already formed by the decisions her father made. She takes on the silence, the secret of the family, the massacre that made them rich.

Sarah's story revolves around her relationship with Jack Langland, a man of mixed heritage. At this point, Grenville uses a woman to highlight the racial conflict scenario. The big issue for Sarah is that she is unable to be free from the father's history. The "edge" here is the boundary of race and class that Sarah cannot cross without devastating consequences. This is how the novel shows that women were essentially tools to keep the colonial lineage pure, and as a result, the Indigenous presence was almost completely wiped out from the family lineage. Sarah's existence is a clear indication that the empire's continuity depended on the emotional repression of women.

V. CONCLUSION

Grenville's work is often categorised as historical fiction, but it is really an act of historical correction. By pulling women from the margins and placing them at the centre of the narrative, she challenges the reader to witness the colonisation of Australia, not as a singular, monolithic event, but as a fractured experience defined by gender. These women and the feminine figures like Rooke are not the heroes of the empire. They are the survivor of it. They exist at the edges, looking both inward at the rigid expectations of English society and outward at the vast, unknowable continent. In the colonial trilogy, Greenville argues that if one has to understand the true cost of empire, they have to look past the men with guns and listen to the women who were left to pick up the pieces.

This study looks at Kate Grenvilles trilogy, *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant,* and *Sarah Thornhill*. It shows how these books change the way we think about women in settlement stories. By focusing on what women thought and felt Grenville challenges the male-dominated stories of exploration and conquest. The trilogy shows women not as passive figures but as observers, mediators and moral interpreters of the colonial experience. Characters like Sal Thornhill, Tagaran and Sarah Thornhill reveal how women's experiences expose the complexities of settler colonialism.

The analysis highlights the female characters are caught between settler society and Indigenous presence. They see tensions that're not in official stories of empire. Their reactions. From unease to reflection. Show the contradictions of colonial expansion. Grenville also shows how everyday settlement practices turn land into sites of possession. The household is not a private space but also a symbol of colonial authority. Women's work helps make imperial occupation seem normal.

The trilogy changes how we think about the frontier. Of heroic conquest it's a site of ethical witnessing. Through womens narration Grenville exposes the aftermath of colonial violence. In *Sarah Thornhill* the retrospective voice highlights the role of memory in confronting suppressed histories.

In the end Grenvilles fiction adds to debates in postcolonial studies. It shows that the colonial past can't be understood through imperial authoritys stories. Womens experiences are crucial, to understanding its consequences. By putting women at the centre of memory Grenville challenges patriarchal historiography. Her trilogy reveals that the edges of empire. Where women often stand. Are also the spaces from which its moral truths become most visible.

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