

An Aboriginal Study of the Cultural Conflicts in Kate Grenville's The Lieutenant

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Abstract

This paper explores and analyzes the cultural conflicts between the white settlers and the aborigines in Kate Grenville's novel *The Lieutenant*. Kate Grenville is one of Australia's best loved authors and her works of fiction have won numerous awards in Australia. The story tells of the friendly relationship and the efforts of conversation between the white protagonist, British officer and astronomer Daniel Rooke, and an aboriginal girl named Tagaran. Grenville shows how the clash of cultures leads to irreversible change and the corruption of lifestyles and values. The cultural conflict occurs by several means including the usage of instruments, language, food and hunting. Kate Grenville portrays the variation of culture between the natives and the settlers from their dress code to each and every activity in their day-to-day life. The whites are very keen in not letting the natives to know about the weapons used by them as they think that teaching the natives about their own culture and usage of weapons will turn the natives against them. The clash between the Aboriginal culture and the British culture becomes serious when the settlers begin to do agriculture for their food. Though the Aborigines are great in number compared to the white settlers, they suppressed the Aboriginal culture and made their culture a dominant one in the Aboriginal's land. This paper focuses on the encounters between the whites and the aborigines and how these encounters make the way to expectations of mutual understanding between two cultures by means of linguistic exchanges.

Keywords: aboriginals, cultural clash, encounters, linguistic exchanges.

The European colonization of Australia and New Zealand is credited to Captain Cook, who is said to be the founding ancestor of the white colonizers. The historical character William Dawes, a young lieutenant recorded the language and culture of the indigenous people of Australia during his first

expedition to Sydney. Kate Grenville depicted the culture of Aborigines with the help of Dawes' notebook by portraying Daniel Rooke, a young lieutenant as a bridge between the Aboriginal culture and the British culture. The colonial encounter of the whites with the indigenous tribes forms the theme of Kate Grenville's novel *The Lieutenant* (2008).

Kate Grenville is one of Australia's best known authors. Her novels are based on the Australian aboriginals and the wrongs done to them by the later settlers. Her two novels *The Secret River* and *The Lieutenant* are linked by a common focus on the lives of early white settlers in colonial Australia and the clashes with the indigenous Australians. *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant*, and *Sarah Thornhill* form a trilogy about the first three generations of colonial Australia.

The Lieutenant is a novel which tells of the friendly relationship and the efforts of conversation between the white protagonist, British officer and astronomer Daniel Rooke, and an aboriginal girl named Tagaran. This novel deals with the encounters between the whites and the aboriginals and how these encounters make the way to expectations of mutual understanding between two cultures by means of linguistic exchanges. The colonial encounter seems to have been a complex one, as a critic notes: ". . . perhaps more than any other event in history, the conquest of Australia poses the problem of understanding other cultures at its starkest" (Dunne 309).

Cultural conflict is a type of conflict that occurs when different cultural values and beliefs clash. It has been used to explain violence and crime. Culture is an essential part of conflict and conflict resolution. In 1788, there were around one million Aboriginal people living across Australia. They had been there for tens of thousands of years, and they knew exactly how to live on the land they occupied. The Australian bush is harsh to those who do not understand it. Aboriginal people lived by the coast and in the interior, and they lived by hunting, fishing and gathering. They moved around when they needed to, as they did not have any concept or need for land ownership. Their lands belonged to all of them. In contrast, the British who arrived in Australia came from an industrializing agricultural society. People lived either close together in busy, chaotic cities, or they lived in rural areas, on land they either owned or paid rent for. They had domesticated animals and grew their crops in fields. When they arrived in Australia, they proclaimed it to be a no-man's land, which had no owner, as it did not have any owners in their sense of the word.

Grenville shows how the clash of cultures leads to irreversible change and the corruption of lifestyles and values. In *The Lieutenant*, the settlers repeatedly commit acts of violent conquest and the slaves are kidnapped and civilized. The culturally arrogant white settlers seek to domesticate and civilize them. Rooke is amazed at the first time he sees them using a teacup or a fork, when they taste a china plate. "It would never again be the first time. Rooke was aware of witnessing something unrepeatable and irreversible. He was watching one universe in the act of encountering another" (137). Similarly in the novel *Secret River* Grenville portrays the difference of culture between the aboriginals and the white settlers. Sal Thornhill impresses upon her son Dick the view that the indigenous are culturally inferior. "We're civilized folk, we don't go round naked" (SR 215). She also calls them primitives. The character Will rages against the laziness of the indigenous tribe who do not plant crops. "They 'ain't never done a hand's turn" and so believes that they thereby ought to abrogate their rights to the land" (SR 290). The natives scorn the white man because they do not know how to use and adapt to the land in the traditional way. Will is ignorant about bush survival strategies such as making fires.

The clash between the aboriginal culture and the British culture becomes serious when the settlers begin to do agriculture for their food. When the colonizers settle in new land they are in a condition to find food in order to survive in that land. The aboriginal people are being used to their landscape so it is easy for them to find food in their land for their survival. But the settlers in turn face several difficulties to find their food as the land is new to them. The British people occupy the agricultural land of natives without their permission and also name that place as if that is their own land. After the settlers occupy and begin to do agriculture in the native's land, the natives cannot get their food freely. They have to depend on the settlers even in their own land. This forms a cultural clash between the settlers and the natives.

The natives hunt animals for their food and they lead a happy life. Hunting animals is one of their cultures. The natives were only a few in their land and they need only a meagre amount of food. So they hunt a few animals only for their need. The settlers after colonizing their lands hunted more animals for their food. Kate Grenville portrays how the settlers slowly destroy the culture of the natives. After the food brought by the settlers to the new land becomes low, Governor Gilbert orders Bruden to hunt a few animals for their food. At first, he cannot find any animal in the land as it is new to him. But soon he begins to hunt birds and later animals. In the beginning, he hunts one or two animals, but the Governor

tells him that this is not enough to feed all his men. Later Brugden begins to hunt more animals and the natives were disappointed by the settler's action. One day, when Brugden goes deep into the forest to hunt animals the natives speared him and from that incident the clash between the two cultures become more violent. Rooke thinks that they will soon decimate the animal population in the surrounding woods. Gilbert continues, saying that the natives' silence will soon be rectified. Rooke realizes that the settlement's presence is ambiguous and possibly dangerous if they cannot talk to the natives about it, and thinks that even war would communicate better than silence.

Kate Grenville beautifully portrays the cultural clash that takes place between the settlers and the aboriginal people in her novel *The Lieutenant*. Even though she portrays little incidents on the cultural clashes directly, she portrays it indirectly. She tells how the settlers destroy the culture of the native people slowly and how they implement their own culture to the natives forcefully. The natives will have their own culture which includes their occupation, life style, religion and so on. When the white men colonize their land and settles there, they will form new rules and regulations which will be suitable for them. But the native people were free in their land and when the settlers implement these rules on them it will be difficult for them and they cannot able to understand also. When the settlers force the natives to follow their culture, thinking that their culture is superior to the culture of natives, there begins the clash between the two cultures. For the natives their culture is great in their land. Similarly, the settlers are also the natives of their own land and consider their culture as a great one in their own land.

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