Australian Utopia in Kate Grenville's The Secret River

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Abstract

The Secret River by Kate Grenville (2005) depicts initial settlement of Australia by convicts transported from Britain, and the torments experienced by both settlers and Aboriginals. Thomas More's Utopia also proposes setting up colonies on its mainland as a natural right if the utopian land becomes overpopulated. The Secret River, like Utopia, responds to the overarching causes of injustice and inequalities in England at the time. Both texts react to specific local issues of wealth, poverty, convicts, power and landownership. This paper attempts to analyze The Secret River by applying the same narrative dynamics and critical perspective of More's Utopia. The standpoint of this paper is that the practice of resettling convicts is similar to More's proposal in Utopia and is initiated to solve contemporary crises in English society and as a vision for a better society. However, and unlike Utopia, Australia in The Secret River becomes a utopia for settlers and a dystopia for the natives due to private property and the destruction of the Indigenous communal life and not the settlement of convicts.

Keywords: Dystopia, Kate Grenville, The Secret River, More's Utopia, convict settlers of Australia

یۆتۆپیای ئۆسترالیا لە ڕووبارە نهێنییەکەی کەیت گرینفیلْدا

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پوختە

ڕووبارە نهێنییەکەی کەیت گرینفیلْ (٢٠٠٥) سەرەتاکانی دامەزراندنی ئۆسترالیا لەلایەن تۆمەتبارانی بەریتانیا و، ئەو مەینەتییانەی هەردوو خەڵکی تازە نیشتەجێ و ڕەسەن چەشتوویانە وێنا دەکات. یۆتۆپیا-کەی موورِیش دامەزراندنی چەند کۆلۆنیایەک لەسەر سەرزەمینی سەرەکی پێشنیار دەکات، ئەمەیش وەک مافێکی سروشتی ئەگەر سەرزەمینی ئەو یۆتۆپیایە لێوانلێو بوو لە دانیشتوان. ڕووباری نهێنی، هاوشێوەی یۆتۆپیا، وەڵامی کۆمەڵێکی زۆر لە هۆکارەکانی نادادپەروەری و نابەرابەرییەکانی ناو بەریتانیا لە ئەو کاتەدا دەداتەوە. هەردوو دەقەکە وەڵامی چەند پرسێکی دیاریکراوی ناوخۆیی پەیوەست بە سامان و برسێتی و تۆمەتباران و دەسەڵات و خاوەنداریتی زەوی دەداتەوە. ئەم توێژینەوە هەوڵی شیکردنەوەی ڕووباری نهێنی دەدات لە ڕێگەی بەکارهێنانی هەمان ئەو دینامیکییەتە گێڕانەوەییانەی لە یۆتۆپیا-کەی موورِدا بەکار هاتوون. پێگەی ئەم توێژینەوە ئەوەیە کە ڕێکارەکانی نیشتەجێکردنەوەی تۆمەتبارەکان هاوشێوەی پێشنیارەکەی موورِن لە یۆتۆپیادا و وەها خراونەتە ڕوو تاکو قەیرانەکانی ئەو دەمەی ناو کۆمەڵگای ئینگلترا چارە بکات و، وەک دیدگایەک بێت لەپێناو کۆمەڵگایەکی باشتر. بە هەمان شێوە، بەڵام جیاواز لە یۆتۆپیا، ئۆسترالیا دەبێتە یۆتۆپیایەک بۆ کەسانی نیشتەجێکراو و شوێنێکی کاول بۆ دانیشتوانی ڕەسەن، ئەمەیش بە هۆی هێنانەکایەی خاوەنداریتیی مولْکی تایبەت و داڕمانی ژیانی گشتی دانیشتوانی ڕەسەن، نەک نیشتەجێکردنی تۆمەتباران.

کلیلەووشەکان: دیستۆپیا یان شاری کاول، کەیت گرینڤیڵ، رووباری نهێنی، یۆتۆپیای موور، تۆمەتبارانی نیشتەجێکراو لە ئۆسترالیا:

Introduction

The Secret River has won many of the most notable national and international book prizes and awards including the Commonwealth Writers Prize and Australian Book Industry Award. The story follows William Thornhill's journey from London to Sydney, and from imprisonment to freedom and settlement. It starts with Thornhill's first night of sorrow in a colony in Sydney in 1806. He is transported to Sydney to gain his pardon for a theft crime, stealing timber and sentenced to death and later servitude in Australia. Sal, his wife, and their son William go with him. Within few years he is pardoned, and initially they intend to go back to England. However, the journey back home never happens, and the family's final landscape is a luxurious villa in New South Wales.

Grenville's story returns to Thornhill's childhood and former life, marked by dire deprivation and theft in London's poor neighborhoods. The writer vividly depicts the struggle faced by the working poor, the high rates of infant mortality, the grueling hunger, violence and the illegal tactics individuals use to survive. The core narrative of The Secret River is about the relationship between the transported convicts and the Aborigines, Indigenous peoples of the continent. In such regards, the novel seems to be "reconfiguring the signifying relations between Australian settlers and the original inhabitants of the country" (Lang, 2014: 2). The work also brings into the surface the violent relationship between settlers and the original inhabitants. Such experience has long been absent in the nation's cultural memory (Varney, 2015). Grenville's narrative also addresses deep-rooted concerns or tensions about the legitimacy or identity of settlers living on land, which is "the foundational anxiety of settler belonging" (Kossew, 2007: 8). In The Secret River, this is often implied in the settlers' unspoken fear and insecurity despite the constant claim of a sense of rightful place or identity on that land.

Two other important and intertwined issues the work explores are landownership and poverty. The storyline threads how poverty in England and social inequality would lead young and hardworking citizens like Thornhill to theft, conviction, and transportation to Australia. Violence, the other theme, occurs once the Aborigines are uprooted by settlers claiming exclusive land ownership.

The Secret River follows Utopia in presenting the background of poverty in England and a society that makes the poor poorer. The Secret River has the same structure as presenting this background followed by showing the evils of private property. Both texts are contextualized within England's social, cultural and political environment of their times. These texts criticize economic disparities and injustices of the early sixteenth and late eighteenth centuries respectively, such as the absurdity of the death penalty applied to economically disadvantaged people, who were coerced into stealing, by the English law. Other issues addressed include labour, property ownership, and forms of punishment. For the British Government, Australia

represented a 'utopia' and a practical proposal for a new start for convicts. That is, to accommodate 'evil' citizens, granting them freedom and land but away from home.

This paper examines the apparent similarities and parallels related to private property in both texts and the rise of conflict in Australia. It also demonstrates the existence of a causal link between poverty and resettlement. For many settlers, Australia might have been the embodiment of More's paradise. Although many writers dismiss utopia as unserious, this paper approaches it as a serious framework intended to critique existing social conditions. Utopian writers like Sir Thomas More were able to employ their creative imagination to design utopias, or what they thought as possible, on the other side of the world. The other side of the world being mysterious and uncharted landmass and an alternative site. A utopian site to offer collective well-being, economic equality, harmony and happiness. The Secret River, as the paper attempts to illustrate, uses the theme of private property as a lens to examine the devastating consequences of the clash of cultures, and within the historical forces brought by poverty and conflict over land ownership. A dystopian site, promoting private possession over collective welfare resulting in inequality and social fragmentation. Private property being the root of all evils in this new settlement, as More argues earlier.

Poverty in England and Alternative Sites

Kate Grenville's The Secret River, as in Utopia, starts with an overview of poverty in England as a backdrop for its story. For The Secret River and Utopia, this background serves to highlight the context of crimes and particularly theft and its causal link with poverty and dire need of English commoners. Both texts argue that poverty makes individuals prone to crime. The fictional Utopia and the actual colonization of Australia are alternative sites to solve the root causes of poverty and crime in England.

Indeed, rapid population growth increased pressure on wages, rents, and food supply in 16th century England (Lindert, 1985), the period during which Utopia was written. The country, like other countries in Europe, was going through despair and a dark time. This included land enclosure, unemployment, poverty and extremely harsh laws (Morton, 1952: 48).

Raphael Hythloday, More's traveler to Utopia, describes the stark contrast between extreme poverty and extreme wealth and inequality in Europe and England. The coexistence of these extremes further exacerbated the grim reality of the poor (More, 1989: 20). A major objection raised in Utopia is the enclosure movement whereby farmers were deprived of land used to be common for pasture and grazing. To survive, farmers found themselves with no alternative but theft. Fencing off land established both a socioeconomic and physical separation between the social classes as More voices through Hythloday.

More's Utopia, and other utopias written after him, are apparently introduced by their writers to propose alternatives to the political outlook. Thomas White, among others, situates Utopia as "a philosophical examination of the fundamental problems of human society in general, and

of the dominant social, political, religious, an economic order of sixteenth-century Europe" (White, 1978: 149). Utopia, like other utopian schemes, serves as a vision of a just society founded on fair social, political, and ethical principles. The audience of the time could make a reference to Utopia against the grim truths of their society (Halpin, 2001: 303). Utopias conventionally draw a comparison, overtly or covertly, between the writers' society and the ones envisioned (Frye, 1965: 325). Lyman Sargent also concludes that these visions are introduced as models of social reform (Sargent, 1982: 566). Such initiatives could have been seen as positive examples of real and achievable social change by the audience of the time and within their original historical contexts.

Utopia, then, offers an alternative site, a model against which the actual society can be measured and perhaps repair its social, political, and economic structures. In this fictitious society, poverty is shown as a social evil that is essentially eradicated through drastic changes and eventually "no one can ever be reduced to poverty or forced to beg." (More, 1989: 61). Unlike Britain, in Utopia, every individual is engaged in work. The fictional society avoids private ownership of land, which is a contrast to the enclosure movement happening in England at the time. Each person is educated in farming and at least one craft, like weaving, carpentry, or masonry. There are no instances of unemployment or underemployment, and labor is shared evenly to ensure no one is overwhelmed. As all members contribute to the economy, the community is self-sustaining, and poverty is virtually eliminated. The community provides excellent care for the elderly, ill, and disabled. This sharply contrasts with neglecting those who are impoverished and defenseless in More's England, where many were left to survive on their own.

Like Utopia, poverty plays a significant role in shaping Thornhill's identity, decisions and ultimate imprisonment and servitude to Australia. Thornhill grows up in desperate poverty in 18th century London. His early life in the slums of Southwark is marked by hunger, hardship, and a constant struggle to survive. In London, Thornhill, never had sufficient food or an appropriate housing, "in the rooms where William Thornhill grew up, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, no one could move an elbow without hitting the wall or the table or a sister or a brother" (Grenville, 2006: 9). The Secret River immerses its audience in the destitution experienced by its protagonist, Thornhill. In a visceral and evocative description of his hunger, which defines the character's existence, Thornhill is shown as "always hungry". This was not only for him, "that was a fact of life: the gnawing feeling in his belly, the flat taste in his mouth, the rage that there was never enough" (Grenville, 2006: 11). Thornhill's mother and his siblings steal to survive.

This experience of grinding poverty pushes Thornhill toward crime, specifically theft, as a means of providing for his family. In England of the time with a setting like this, almost everyone becomes a thief. When the parents of Sal pass away, the couple steal to survive. Although Sal was raised much better than Thornhill. His eventual conviction and transportation to Australia stem directly from this economic desperation.

Grenville highlights the rigid class system of early 19th century England. Thornhill is born into a world where upward mobility is nearly impossible with the deep inequalities embedded in this class system. From birth, people like Thornhill were denied opportunities of education, property, and social mobility while the upper classes did maintain privilege and power. For him, even the 'Promised Land' is something that is exclusive to the nobles (Grenville, 2006:108). Despite hard work and intelligence, he is trapped by his social status. This injustice underscores the novel's critique of a system that criminalizes the poor while offering them few means of escape.

In The Secret River, Australia represents the alternative, a land where men like William Thornhill believe they might reinvent themselves. It is, and in contrast to the slums of London, "a place out of a dream, a fierce landscape of chasms and glowering cliffs and a vast unpredictable sky" (Grenville, 2006: 101). Thornhill longs for a piece of land that he can exclusively claim as his own. Australia offers a fresh start and a second chance where "no one was the poorer for the theft. In this place, where everyone had started fresh-born on the day of their arrival" (Grenville, 2006: 335). The possibility of a new story, a story where Thornhill had not "born in dirty Bermondsey but in clean Kent, by the chalk cliffs" (Grenville, 2006: 335). Perhaps this is made possible through, though unrecognized, the spiritual richness of the Indigenous people who enjoy a mutual sustainable relationship free from hierarchies. The island with its fertile land with no political or private ownership is a utopia for the settlers although not culturally or economically as advanced as More's island.

Grenville paints an evocative and poignant picture of Thornhill transformation and the pivotal emotional moment in his life, as he begins to taste comfort, safety, and a new kind of stability:

He was no longer the person who thought that a little house in Swan Lane and a wherry of his own was all a man might desire. It seemed that he had become another man altogether. Eating the food of this country, drinking its water, breathing its air, had remade him, particle by particle. This sky, those cliffs, that river were no longer the means by which he might return to some other place. This was where he was: not just in body, but in soul as well. (Grenville, 2006: 302)

By the end of The Secret River, William Thornhill becomes a wealthy landowner, a dramatic shift from his origins as a poor London waterman, and vowing not to go back to this grueling and unfulfilling life (Grenville, 2006: 212). Thornhill establishes his own garden on the land he has claimed, fully enclosed and fenced. This fence, a physical symbol of ownership and exclusion, imitates the English tradition of enclosure, which historically deprived the poor of access to common land. The private garden becomes their utopia, however, is built on Aboriginal dispossession. Grenville presents his rise in wealth not as a triumph, but as morally complex and deeply unsettling. William Thornhill achieves the wealth and social status he was denied in England, owning a grand house overlooking land that once belonged to the Darug people.

Thornhill and Sal reproduce the class structures of English aristocracy in this new setting. The family had seven servants and three maids, reflection of the ways in which the self-fashioned aristocracy reproduced its status through domestic labor and class hierarchy:

So, rather than taking them Home, she had made Home here, and Thornhill had gone along with it in every way he could think of. He made sure she had all that Home had promised: a couple of sprung armchairs in the parlour and a sofa to go with them, a girl to cook and clean and another to do her washing for her, a paisley shawl from India with a peacock on it that had cost what he would have worked for a year to make on the Thames. (Grenville, 2006: 323)

Their life, and possibly of many settlers, becomes like the English aristocracy criticized by Thomas More. A class "living in idleness and luxury, without doing any good to society, no longer satisfies them; they have to do positive evil" (More, 1989: 19). The same privileges and social hierarchies these settlers previously suffered from and drove the English society into poverty.

Land in England and Alternative Sites

The Secret River can be seen as a practical representation of the challenges to the project of creating a utopia. Although not necessarily inspired by More's Utopia, situated in the frontiers of the British empire, Australia was a utopian project constructed to host convicts and settlers. Between 1788 and 1868, more than 162,000 convicts had been sent to Australia (Case, 2025). Conflict arose with the host community due to competition over land, acquiring it or protecting it. Unlike the Australian settlement project, which was based on individual land acquisition, the theoretical success of More's Utopia lies in its model of communal living, shared ownership, and equality. Utopia was a direct response to the inequality of land distribution of 16th century England. Like More's Utopians, the Aboriginals enjoyed peaceful communal life, free of hierarchy till the settlers arrived. Indigenous people's traditional relationship to the land and common boundaries, spiritual and communal connection, was invisible to the settlers. Hence, private ownership of the land by settlers was the root of the conflict.

Land ownership is a key illustration of England's unequal wealth distribution as expressed by More's Utopia. In early Tudor England, wealthy Englishmen aimed to enlarge their significant fortune by enclosing common lands. According to More's persona, Raphael Hythloday, many farmers and their workers have lost their jobs and means of subsistence because of this practice of enclosure. That one acquisitive and covetous landowner could enclose thousands of acres of ground (More, 1989: 12).

Private property is criticized for its part in sustaining social turmoil and inequality. True justice, equality, and a well-ordered society cannot be attained as long as property is privately owned, according to the background of the lengthy discussions in Utopia. This is because wealth and resources continue to be concentrated in the hands of a select few, burdening and worrying majority. Hythloday states that until private property:

is taken away there can be no equitable or just distribution of things, nor can the world be happily governed: for as long as that is maintained, the greatest and the far best part of mankind will be still oppressed with a load of cares and anxieties. (More, 1989: 28)

Hythloday believes abolishing private property to be the only real solution for poverty of England. The Utopians regard themselves as trusted with land rather than true owners (More,

1989: 32). This reflects a core value in Thomas More's Utopia, a communal view of property and ownership which is in direct contrast to the plan intended for the alternative site of Australia.

In Grenville's The Secret River, private property is the foundational role and the steering principle of the story (Hamilton, 2016: 143). Land ownership is the motif of settlers and shapes their identity. As "no one had ever spoken to him of how a man might fall in love with a piece of ground" (Grenville, 2006: 106), Thornhill's transformation and emotional attachment to the piece of ground is not surprising given his deprivation in London.

Ownership by settlers is established by fencing, similar to their place of origin, England. This land encloser criticized in Utopia, is also one of the driving forces in The Secret River. Land that remained unenclosed was not suitable for planting crops. Thornhill's family, like many others, are obliged to steal vegetables to survive. This as the land left unenclosed is wasteland, "between the fields, enclosed behind their hedges and walls, were the boggy places too wet to plant in" (Grenville, 2006: 9). This references the 'Enclosure Movement' in England where the enclosure of common land had deepened class divisions by consolidating land into the hands of a few, in fact "no one that Thornhill knew personally had bought so much as a yard of land" (Grenville, 2006: 85). As part of the working class in London, he had little hope of ever owning anything, especially land.

Particularly, this exclusive ownership and enclosure of land become the source of clash between the settlers and the Indigenous Australian inhabitants. Thornhill justifies and rationalizes his ownership and the dispossession of Indigenous people based on the very system which eliminated communal farming rights. Thornhill feels that "there were no signs that the blacks felt the place belonged to them". Since "they had no fences that said this is mine" (Grenville, 2006: 93; emphasis in the original). He claims, "They got no rights to any of this place. No more than a sparrow" (Grenville, 2006: 290; emphasis in the original). Once he fences the hundred acres, he declares the place to be "Thornhill's place" (Grenville, 2006: 196). Settlers had the convenience of naming it after themselves which represented a claim to identity, authority, and permanence.

The Aboriginals, in sharp contrast, share a spiritual and cultural relationship to the land that is common, which is an extremely ancient tradition. They don't see land as something to be privately owned or exploited in the sense familiar to the settlers and preponderance of civilizations worldwide. They run, they hunt, they pick, this communal ownership and sense of shared borders are not visible to the settlers.

Conclusion

In The Secret River, Kate Grenville depicts the Indigenous Australians' common cultural structure as a seeming utopia compared to the rigid class system of early 19th century England. To William Thornhill, banished from the slums of London, the colony is seen to offer a second chance, land, status, and the possibility of self-determination denied him previously. This

utopian vision, however, is based upon the displacement of Indigenous Australians and abolishing their traditional relationship with the land. Although private property and settlement might be intertwined but are still distinct phenomena. The Secret River is examined using More's critique of his own society and contrasting it with an imagined, ideal one of Utopia. More's critical outlook is applied as an analytical framework, rather than comparing themes of The Secret River and Utopia. The paper has tried to show that the settlement of the convicts did not cause the destruction of Indigenous lives, but the establishing and enforcing private property. Settlers achieve their dream and social mobility through private control over land which transforms Aboriginal life into dystopia, nightmare and loss of freedom, culture and communal ownership.

اليوتوبيا الأسترالية في رواية "النهر السري" لكيت غرينفيل

الخلاصة

تصور رواية "النهر السري" (2005) لكيت غرينفيل الاستيطان المبكر لأستراليا من قِبل المحكومين البريطانيين، والمعاناة التي عاناها كلٌّ من المستوطنين والسكان الأصليين. كما تقترح رواية "يوتوبيا" لتوماس مور إقامة مستعمرات على برها الرئيسي كحق طبيعي في حال أصبحت الأرض الطوباوية مكتظة بالسكان. تستجيب رواية "النهر السري"، مثلها مثل رواية "يوتوبيا"، للأسباب الجذرية للظلم وعدم المساواة في إنجلترا آنذاك. يتفاعل كلا النصين مع قضايا محلية محددة تتعلق بالثروة والفقر والمُدانين والسلطة وملكية الأراضي. تحاول هذه الورقة البحثية تحليل رواية "النهر السري" من خلال تطبيق نفس ديناميكيات السرد في رواية "يوتوبيا" لمور (المدينة الفاضلة). تتمثل وجهة نظر هذه الورقة البحثية في أن ممارسة إعادة توطين المُدانين تُشبه اقتراح مور في رواية "يوتوبيا"، وقد قدمت لحل الأزمات المعاصرة في المجتمع الإنجليزي في حينها، وكرؤية لمجتمع أفضل. ومع ذلك، وعلى النقيض من اليوتوبيا، أصبحت أستراليا يوتوبيا للمستوطنين و ديستوبيا (المدينة الفاسدة) للسكان الأصليين بسبب فرض الملكية الخاصة وتدمير نمط الحياة الجماعية للسكان الأصليين وليس توطين المحكومين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ديستوبيا (المدينة الفاسدة)، كيت غرينفيل، النهر السري، يوتوبيا لتوماس مور (المدينة الفضلة)، المستوطنون المحكوم عليهم في أستراليا