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DILEMMA OF CHOICE: A CONTRASTIVE SCRUTINY OF BRUTALITY AND HUMANITY  
IN KATE GRENVILLE'S *THE SECRET RIVER*

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ABSTRACT

The paper entitled "Dilemma of Choice: A Contrast Scrutiny of Brutality and Humanity in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*" is an attempt to analyze the characters' psychological struggle between choices of life. The theory "Paradox of Choice" states that too much of choices will drive us bewildered. As a result, the author portrays the novel's protagonist as a soul scuffled hard between morality and immorality. The author depicts Thornhill as a futile individual in decision making. In addition to that she presents both humane and ill-famed characters. The convicts in England being exiled to New South Wales attempt to inhabit the land of the native blacks who are emotionally connected to their land. They refuse to give up the land and that leads to a clash. Thornhill's selfishness and befriending of the sadist - Smasher, makes him to involve in Brutality. Being stuck in his own emotions, he made a horrible decision that ends up in a cruel massacre of the natives. Later, he regrets for his assistance in the massacre. Thus, the author depicts the instability in his thoughts and action. The present article brings out various instances from the text to substantiate the presuppositions specified by the researchers.

**Key words:** Dilemma of Choice, brutality, humanity, and self-centeredness.

Brutality and humanity are though disparate in nature, ontologically they exist in the same soul. Consequently, many authors have attempted to pen both the phenomenon in their works. As a result, Australian writer Kate Grenville also employs the notion in her works. Her avidity to acquire erudition of the history of her ancestor Solomon Wiseman, a settler of Hawkesbury River, contrives an insight about the early interactions among the aborigines and the settlers. Although Kate Grenville intends to indite the work as a non-fiction around Wiseman, it gradually becomes a fiction gleans on her scrutiny into Wiseman and not specifically around him. The Novel, *The Secret River* revolves around two ideologies: humanity and brutality that would have ensued within the white settlers and the Dharug people.

William Thornhill is destined to be poor by birth. Therefore he is forced to plunder and is sentenced to death. Instead of being hanged he is exiled to New South Wales. There is a riot on track between the White settlers and the Dharug inhabitants. Both the Whites and Dharugs are undergoing a fierce contest for the land. Thornhill's cry "Be off!"(9), his act of raising "his hand against the man."(9) and the response "Be off!" of the black man in return in "his own tone exactly" (9) alludes to the fact that there is a dominant struggle is ensuing amidst the Whites and the inhabitants since before.

Thornhill's inability to confront poverty strikes his belly. The timely apprenticeship designated by Mr. Middleton initiates a drastic change in his life and "For the first time in his life, Thornhill is not always hungry, not always cold". (26) Mr. Middleton's act of benevolence is dazzled with humanity. Mr. Middleton gives her daughter Sal's hand in marriage to Thornhill. By his generosity, Thornhill leads a new and pleasant life which he has never dreamt of. Mr. Middleton builds Thornhill as a skilled waterman. Mr. Middleton has a sorrowful past that he lost his children after a month of born and became "a sterner and more silent man." (17). However he accepts Thornhill as his son - in - law and "turns out to be a good master" to Thornhill. He offers his second best wherry as a wedding present. Despite his regretful life he has a concern for others and was portrayed as a character of humanity.

Thornhill also encounters a man of brutality, Smasher Sullivan, a dog breeder. He has a terrible abhorrence for the aborigines. He trains his dogs in such a way, that they onslaught only the blacks. "A whip is a mighty handy thing to have round your average black savage . . . and the dog Missy here, I trained her up special to go for black skin." (126) is Smasher's word - of - mouth in drunken stage. Kate Grenville also excessively keeps track of Smasher's brutality as "he had left behind its mirror - image, a silence in which his violent stories echoed." (126) Smasher narrates horrible tales which symbolized death, slaughter, terror and blood even to the kids and "got onto the subject of Blacks. It seems no story about them was terrible to repeat." (125) Kate Grenville exemplifies him as cold - blooded brute, whose "mind wanders barely on blood as he uttered I got three guns" (126) and "Loaded ready to shoot any black arse comes near the place." (126)

Smasher is a sadist driven by loneliness. He has no wife or children. This contrives him loquacious and he "starved for company, which was easy to see." (125) Though his stories of native's monstrousness against the settlers seems accurate, a short skimming would elucidate that they are fictitious. The above instances obviously expose his profound hatred for the aborigines and "When pressed, Smasher admitted that he had not seen the event personally....it was in the Gazette, so it must be true." (125). Smasher's deed of keeping "a black woman, cringing against the wall, panting so he could see the teeth gleaming in her pained mouth, and the sores where the chain had chafed, red jewels against her black skin"(199) as a sex slave reveals his extreme brutality. Smasher relays the men to massacre a group of natives in Blackwood's area. He says ,"We can get there tonight"(234).Owing to his brutal behavior, he is speared mercilessly by Whisker Harry in the massacre. Thornhill "watches as the spear left the black man's hand. Across the clearing Smasher took a step forward as if to catch it"(242). When Smasher "stopped short, the spear was vibrating out of his chest" (242) and the author's conclusion makes everyone to acknowledge that Smasher is smashed by his ruthless character of injuring blacks both mentally and physically. Kate Grenville beautifully exposes the character even by its name 'Smasher'.

Sal Thornhill experiences an excellent bond with the black women and trades successfully the bowls and digging sticks with them. Sal's act of offering "a bit of pork"(116) to the needy black reveals her inner beauty. "She was on her way with a baby over her shoulder and the pork in her hand" (116) to lend the piece of pork to Scabby Bill. In fact, she despises Smasher for his barbaric and inhuman attitude towards the aboriginal people. Instead, she thought that the blacks could be put "to work" and said Thornhill to "civilize them enough to use the spade"(161). When Smasher plots to kill the aborigines, Sal raises disapproval. As her humanity makes her to despise torturing the blacks, she never wanted the aborigines to be harmed by her husband, Thornhill. Sal makes him to promise that he would never inflict pain on the blacks. The narrator introduces another young character Willie, the first born of Mr. and Mrs. Thornhill with a violent attitude. Willie is not naturally brutal. He has been a "young lad for whom his father was a god, and not a boy who thought he was already a man" (152). His attention towards Smasher's vocalization forces him to behave violently. He tells Thornhill to "get the gun" and also to "Let them see the gun"(152). He desires more for violence than placidity. The brutality and violence in the text actually reflects the historical incidents. The text becomes a document of history which unveils the silenced history of Australian aborigines. Lorenzo Veracini elucidates the documentation of actual historical violence in the following manner: "However, while a process of collective revision of received historical narratives would be a slow one, Aboriginal issues and narratives involving Aboriginal peoples gradually gained visibility in the academic world (and in growing sectors of public opinion)" (441).

Thornhill comes across a benevolent natured man, Thomas Blackwood. Thomas Blackwood, a former convict trades successfully along with Thornhill. Blackwood speaks the language of the aborigines and had a great esteem for them. He lives with a native woman and has a child. Blackwood is emotionally connected with the land and admires the aborigines. He abhors Smasher as he attempts to wipe out the poor aborigines from their own land. He feels that there "ain't nothing in this world just for the taking. A man got to pay a fair price for taking. Matter of give a little, take a little"(85). Often, he helps the natives by offering some of his possessions. He begins to reminisce when he sees the Daisy yams. He says, "they give me a couple when I first come. I gone and give them a nice little mullet for them"(134) and shakes his head at the memory. He always reminds Thornhill that "when you take a little, bear in mind you got to give a little"(135). This reveals his true concern for the aborigines. He leads a peaceful and contented life in Australia. He lets Dick Thornhill keep the land.

Dick, the second son of Thornhill befriends the native children. He admires the woods and the river. He learns to light a fire by rubbing two sticks together and to throw a spear. He is curious to learn the tricks of the natives and being amazed, He says to Thornhill that Long Bob "is showing us how you make fire, Da. No flint or nothing"(168).He begins to imitate the native children. Dick is "down with the blacks ain't got no clothes on"(168). Being white, he plays with the blacks and "it was hard to tell the difference. Dick runs, calls and laughs with them and he could have been their pale cousin"(168). He finds his parents unskillful and says that the natives "don't need no flint or nothing, like you do"(171) Thornhill cannot light a fire by himself and Dick's anxious face split into smile when Thornhill says " better get him to show you again"(174). After Thornhill's assistance in the blood dispersal of the aborigines, Dick leaves his home and "had not told either of them he was leaving"(256). Often, he visits his mother, however, he doesn't speak to his father after the affray. Later, he is known by the name Dick Blackwood as he stays up with Thomas Blackwood. "Newcomers did not know that he was William Thornhill's son"(236). He scratches around in Blackwood's fields, growing enough to keep the still going.

Birtles, a gigantic figured man, dwells at the Hawkesbury River. He lives next to the Thornhill's residence. Smasher and Birtles are great comrades in their battle against the Dharug people. Though Birtles had a first name, "Smasher introduced him as Sagitty"(129). He shows his cruelty to the aborigines with the justification that they "took his axe. . .the tin dish from inside the hut and his shirt that he had washed and spread over a bush. . .the last of the flaming fowls" (130). His brutality had been obviously uncovered as he participates in the sexual abuse of a black woman. The black woman is here objectified. She is dehumanized not only of her race but also because of her gender. Deborah M. Horvitz explicates the psychology behind sadism thus: "In so doing the wish to hurt, abuse or violate recruits the oppressor into objectifying victims" (30). The commodities that become his reason for torturing Dharugs are demolished cruelly by them. "No dog, no fowls pecking about"(230) implies that they are nevermore. They set Sagitty's place on fire. "A tin cup had been crushed with such force it have been driven into the ground" (231) to reduce their annoyance. His dog is still chained "but her throat had been cut. The only thing not burned was the water barrel"(231). Thornhill identifies Sagitty behind it "like a man admiring the sky"(231). Sagitty is speared and his "blood was so dark that it was almost black....welled up thick out of the wound through his shirt"(231). The above illustrations provide surety about the revenge being within the blacks.

Mr.Webb, known by the name Spider, is one of the settlers on the Hawkesbury. His crops are stolen by the aborigines when he is away from his farm. He says that the natives are "vermin, the same way rats is vermin"(131). He finds the natives as a threat and assists in the massacre of the aborigines. He is sure to shatter the natives and said "Get them before they get us"(235). The reason for Author's depiction of brutality may be connected with the author's empathy towards the victims. The humanity of the author, through empathy, may be revealed in her depiction of violence. Susannah Radstone expounds the connection between philanthropic empathy and writing of violence thus: "empathy might be found in the different temporalities of history and of writing about the past. As we have seen, empathy and reparative 'contributing to' follow on from acts of powerful but survivable destruction – destruction that has been more power- ful in fantasy than in reality. Empathic reparation goes back over destruction, constructively con- tributing to that which has survived" (292).

The protagonist of the fiction William Thornhill is a man, who is baffled between sadists and humanitarians principles. Thornhill's ménages Middleton, Sal, Dick and his colleague Blackwood are benevolent in nature. He also comes across notorious beings like Smasher, Sagitty and Spider whose souls are overflowing with brutality. Initially poverty makes Thornhill a thieving kid. Mr. Middleton saves him by a warning "No thieving, mind...Any thieving and you are out on your ears"(24). He helps him in spite of his distress. Sal's benevolence is revealed in her conversation with Thornhill as he says, "you go and help Sagitty out"(230). Although she has hatred for Sagitty's character, she stresses her husband to manifest his ability to save him. The idea dilemma between humanity and brutality can be paralleled with idea of being civilized and savage. The characters expressing their kindness and compassion are considered as civilized, therefore associated settlers. Sue Kossew further defines the civilized and savage nature of the characters in the following manner:

Indeed, as the novel progresses, Thornhill is forced to reformulate his preconceptions about the nature of "civilization" and "savagery". He becomes increasingly aware of the highly sophisticated nature of the Aborigines' relationship to their land, one that belies the idea of them as "idle savages". Despite Sal's assurances that it is nakedness that marks the difference between savages and "civilised folk", William comes to realize that the boundaries between the two terms are far more subtle and fluid. (15)

At first, the Author says, "Thornhill felt a quick pulse of fright"(74) when he sees Scabby Bill. Later when the blacks seems to be waiting for something "Thornhill wondered what he might offer them"(116).Sal offers them a bit of pork but they do not recognize the pork as food. Therefore, "Thornhill demonstrates by swallowing himself"(116) to make them eat the pork. When the black do not leave "Thornhill thought of the coins in his pocket. There was a penny and a silver six pence , not as good as beads"(117). This reveals his deep affection and sympathy for the aborigines. Having acknowledged the brutal attitude of Smasher, "Thornhill was not interested in hearing any advice that Smasher Sullivan might give"(135). Thornhill begins to give the men names: "humble sorts of names that made their difference less potent"(157). When Long Bob glances at him, he introduces himself. Thornhill puts a hand against his chest and says, "Me, Thornhill. It's me name, get it? Me, Thornhill"(169). This makes Long Bob to look at him and "his face broke up into a smile that showed his teeth"(169).

The ill-famed Smasher and Sagitty always intend him to have an erroneous notion on the natives. His selfishness to stay in his desired area forces him to pick up defense despite morality. He joins his hands with Smasher in the slaughter. He is mentally unstable and he could not "choose between his wife and his place"(236). He is actually roped to take part in their combat in a drunken state. "Thornhill drank off the rest of his glass and spoke quickly. Tonight then, I'll be home by breakfast" and utters that "I come and slice out the tongue that blabbed" (236). He has a change in his attitude after the massacre. The novel ends with his inefficiency to make peace with the natives, which makes him to "peer through the telescope"(262) searching for the aborigines in the landscape. Thus, throughout the novel, the author has depicted various characters with both brutal and benevolent attitudes. The characters are given chance to choose between either brutality or humanity. Consequent, we infer that the Novel, thus illustrates the instability in the thoughts of the author which results in the dilemma of the choice of the characters.

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