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**Literary Theories**

### From Convict Ships to Colonial Claims: Globalisation Narratives and Ambiguity in Grenville's Trilogy

A. Aparna, Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore.

Dr. C. Anita, Associate Professor, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore.

**Abstract:** This article examines Kate Grenville's colonial trilogy, *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant*, and *Sarah Thornhill*, as a narrative that maps the shift from global displacement to localized colonial possession. By viewing the 19th-century imperial project as an early form of globalization, Grenville reveals the ambiguity involved in the movement of people across the "Black Atlantic" and into the Pacific. However, this idea is challenged by the global systems of class and capital that caused their displacement, resulting in moral paralysis and unresolved colonial guilt. This article explores the intersection of forced migration, territorial expansion, and moral decline in Grenville's trilogy. Grenville presents the shift from the "convict ship" to the "colonial claim" as a foundational narrative of globalization. Her protagonists are not just settlers; they are displaced migrants caught in the vast machinery of British imperial commerce. The trauma of the dispossessed convict is manipulated to justify the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Grenville sheds light on the "human cost of logistics," emphasizing the psychological struggle required to turn stolen land into a hereditary asset. She uncovers how the silence surrounding colonial violence remains the structural basis of modern settler-colonial identity.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Globalization, Convict Narrative, Australian Literature, Subaltern Studies, Ambiguity.



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## Introduction

The transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century marked a crucial moment in the history of global connectivity. Many view globalization as a late twentieth-century development marked by digital connectivity and neoliberal economics. However, the people of the British Isles and the Indigenous peoples of Australia first experienced this "globalization" as a brutal disruption through the cramped confines of convict ships and the subsequent loss of land and identity. Grenville's trilogy reimagines this time, shifting focus from imperial records to the messy, lived reality of the frontier.

The main tension in Grenville's work lies in the ambiguity of the settler-invader. Her characters, such as William Thornhill, Daniel Rooke, and Sarah Thornhill, are rarely one-dimensional villains. They are also victims of a strict British class system. Cast to the edges of the empire, they become the oppressors of the land's original inhabitants.

Grenville's trilogy serves as a powerful entry point into this historical period. By following the Thornhill family's journey and Daniel Rooke's intellectual path, she creates a narrative space where the large movements of the empire collide with individual experiences. This article argues that the trilogy critiques the "History Wars," a vigorous public debate in Australia about colonial settlement. It highlights the ambiguity of the settler-invader.

### The Secret River: The Convict Ship as a Tool of Global Displacement

In *The Secret River*, we meet William Thornhill, a man shaped by the harsh poverty of London's docklands. His journey from Thames waterman to convict, and finally to wealthy landowner, is made possible by the ultimate symbol of eighteenth-century global logistics: the convict ship. Thornhill's move from the Thames to New South Wales signifies forced global migration. The "global" here isn't a vague concept; it is a physical displacement. Thornhill represents the "surplus population" of London. His transportation is a result of a globalizing empire that views people as exportable commodities.

In the British Empire, convicts are treated as commodities. The transportation system offered a globalized solution to local issues of overpopulation and crime. Grenville portrays the journey to New South Wales as a suspension of time and identity. On the ship, Thornhill loses his humanity and becomes just another unit in a global ledger. The ship serves as what Michel Foucault refers to as a "heterotopia." It is a place that exists outside all others, yet can be pinpointed. It is on this ship that the "global" becomes real. For the convicts, the ocean is not a path to opportunity, but a barrier that separates them from their heritage. However, once they arrive, this displacement creates an aggressive need for "place." Thornhill's claim to a "secret river" reflects a psychological response to the rootlessness imposed by his global journey. The ship acts as a "non-place," where old hierarchies seem suspended, only to be replaced by a more brutal colonial hierarchy upon arrival.

### **The Lieutenant: Scientific Globalism vs. Colonial Reality**

The Lieutenant (2008) shifts focus to the intellectual and linguistic aspects of colonial encounters. Based on William Dawes' historical journals, Daniel Rooke embodies the "Enlightenment" side of globalization—the quest to categorize, measure, and understand the world through a scientific viewpoint. Rooke's attempts to learn the Gadigal language illustrate a different type of globalization: the exchange of knowledge. Yet, this "global" curiosity is frustrated by the "colonial" reality of the military. "If you were part of the machine, you were part of its evil." This quote highlights the moral ambiguity of the intellectual in a globalized empire: one can observe the stars but cannot escape the blood on the ground.

The ambiguity surfaces in Rooke's silence. His scientific detachment serves as both his greatest strength and moral weakness. Rooke is sent to New South Wales not to farm but to observe. His mission is to track a comet, linking the remote outpost of Sydney Cove to a global scientific community back in London. This "celestial globalization" suggests a world united by mathematics and stars. The novel's main ambiguity appears when Rooke starts learning the Gadigal language, particularly through his relationship with Tagaran, a young girl. Rooke hopes language can serve as a "bridge," a universal human connection that transcends the violence of the colony.

### **Inherited Silence: Sarah Thornhill**

Sarah Thornhill addresses the long-term effects of these global movements. It explores the "forgetting" necessary to maintain a colonial claim. Sarah discovers her father's past, revealing that the "Global North's" wealth is tied to the trauma of the "Global South." The narrative moves into the mid-nineteenth century, showing how the "global" impacts Sarah, who grows up in a house built on the site of a massacre. Yet, she is kept from the truth by silence. This highlights a broader national ambiguity: modern Australia's wealth is based on an unrecognized foundation of dispossession.

### **Ambiguity as a Literary Strategy**

Grenville's use of ambiguity doesn't excuse colonial violence; it explains why it persists. By refusing to create clear villains, she challenges readers to recognize the systemic nature of globalization and colonialism. William Thornhill is a product of the British class system. His "crimes" stem from a society that offers him no lawful means of survival. In this sense, he is a victim of the global empire. Yet, when he reaches the banks of the Hawkesbury River, he transforms into the oppressor.

Grenville's ambiguity complicates the narrative of "pioneer" history. Thornhill is not a hero of civilization; he is a scared, illiterate man who turns to violence to secure his family's future, knowing no other way to live in the global hierarchy. The "claim" he lays on the land results from a desire to escape his global outcast status and establish a local kingdom. Characters like Sal Thornhill, who longs for "home" while benefiting from stolen land, illustrate the average person's complicity in these global systems.

### **Conclusion**

The trilogy ends not with a resolution, but with a haunting sense of loss. William Thornhill dies wealthy, looking through a telescope at land he "owns" but will never fully understand. Grenville suggests that narratives of globalization progress, connection, and expansion are intertwined with colonial claims. The "convict ship" transported not just bodies; it carried a mindset that prioritized the empire's "global" rights over the "local" rights of Indigenous inhabitants. For modern readers, the ambiguity in Grenville's trilogy acts as a mirror. It raises questions about how much of our current global comfort relies on the "secret rivers" of the past—stories of displacement and silence that remain untold. Her trilogy implies that globalization isn't a recent phenomenon; it is a process rooted in the salt air of convict ships and the blood-stained soil of the Hawkesbury River. The "ambiguity" she presents avoids a tidy moral resolution. By emphasizing the dual status of the convict-settler as both victim and oppressor, she compels today's audience to recognize the complex beginnings of our globalized world.

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