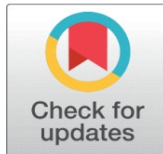


BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRICISM: A DEEP ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF KATE GRENVILLE'S SARAH THORNHILL

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ABSTRACT

The study examines Kate Grenville's *Sarah Thornhill* through the framework of deep ecological theory, addressing anthropocentric perspectives and highlighting the novel's promotion of a more interconnected and inclusive relationship between humans and the natural world. Using Val Plumwood's critique of human-centred hierarchies, the study explores Grenville's critique of the colonial mindset that elevates human dominance over nature, overlooking the inherent worth of non-human life. Through the narrative, Grenville portrays the interdependence of human and non-human life while critiquing the ecological and cultural consequences of anthropocentrism. *Sarah Thornhill* emerges as a profound exploration of the moral and ecological responsibilities of colonial societies, promoting a sustainable and inclusive worldview that honours the interconnectedness of all life forms.

Keywords: Deep Ecology, Human-Nature Interconnection, Colonial Exploitation, Anthropocentrism, Indigenous Knowledge, Sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

Kate Grenville's *Sarah Thornhill* offers a compelling exploration of the lasting impact of colonialism on both the natural environment and Indigenous communities. Through a deep ecological framework, this study examines how the novel addresses the consequences of human exploitation of the land. Central to this analysis is the recognition of the profound connection between Australian Indigenous peoples and the environmental connection rooted in a holistic worldview where land, culture, and identity are deeply intertwined. By emphasizing the disruption caused by colonial practices, the novel reveals the ecological degradation and cultural loss that ensued.

Grenville critiques the anthropocentric mindset that led to environmental destruction and the marginalization of Indigenous ecological knowledge. Indigenous Australians have an intimate understanding of the land and its natural rhythms, developed over millennia, contrasting sharply with the colonial approach that sought to dominate and exploit. This study delves into the moral and ecological consequences of colonial domination as portrayed in *Sarah Thornhill*, advocating for a relationship with the environment that honours Indigenous perspectives and aligns with deep ecological principles.

"The term 'deep ecology' was first introduced by Arne Naess in 1972 in an attempt to characterize what he saw as a distinctive faction emerging within the environmental, or 'ecology', movement" (Diehm 02) and expanded by thinkers like Val Plumwood, aims to shift humanity's relationship with the natural world from domination to harmony and interconnectedness. Val Plumwood's *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* emphasizes the need to move beyond anthropocentrism and recognize the intrinsic value of nature and its deep interconnections with human life. This article applies Plumwood's deep ecological philosophy to *Sarah Thornhill*, exploring how the novel challenges colonial exploitation and anthropocentrism while promoting a more ethical and inclusive approach to nature.

2. CRITIQUE OF COLONIAL AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Anthropocentrism is a perspective that places humans at the centre of the universe, valuing human interests, needs, and experiences above those of non-human beings and the natural environment. This worldview often leads to the exploitation and prioritization of natural resources for human benefit, viewing the natural world primarily as a means to satisfy human desires. In *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Plumwood focuses on the historical precedence of human domination over nature. "All our notions of dominating nature stem from the very real domination of human by human.... As a historical statement [this] declares in no uncertain terms that the domination of human by human preceded the notion of dominating nature." (Plumwood 14-15)

In the critique of colonialism and anthropocentrism within *Sarah Thornhill*, Kate Grenville exposes the profound and destructive impact of colonial attitudes toward both land and people. The Thornhill family's wealth, founded on the violent seizure of Aboriginal land, epitomizes how colonialism extends beyond physical domination to encompass ecological destruction. This aligns with Val Plumwood's critique of colonialism, where land is reduced to a mere resource, stripped of its intrinsic value and severed from the Indigenous ecological knowledge that once maintained its balance. Grenville's portrayal of settler farming practices disrupts the natural harmony that Indigenous stewardship once upheld, illustrating the lasting environmental and social scars left by colonial exploitation.

Grenville describes Thornhill's land as, "I waited for the others at the end of Thornhill's. No fence there, but a stony spine of ridge coming down into a jumble of rocks. The end of the good land, nothing past that but prickly bush" (Grenville 20). In this postcolonial context, 'the end of the good land' represents a stark contrast between fertile land for human use and the wild, untamed "prickly bush" beyond. This binary thinking, dividing the land into useful and wasteful categories, echoes colonial efforts to control and categorize nature, reducing complex ecosystems to mere commodities. Plumwood's deep ecology challenges this dualistic thinking, advocating for an interconnected understanding of nature, where all forms of life possess intrinsic value and are part of a holistic system.

This anthropocentric view extends to the treatment of Indigenous people, who like the land, are treated as obstacles to colonial progress. The study involving 'blackwood' and the settlers' violent actions reflects this, mirroring the exploitation of the land. Grenville's depiction of the brutal removal of Indigenous people reveals how colonialism placed human (colonial) interests above the well-being of both the environment and its original inhabitants. Plumwood critiques this exploitation, emphasizing that these hierarchies of control, whether imposed on nature or people, are deeply intertwined and must be dismantled.

Plumwood's deep ecology calls for the rejection of dualisms between humans and nature, as well as between colonizers and the colonized. Instead, she promotes a relational approach that recognizes the value of all living beings and ecosystems. The violence depicted in *Sarah Thornhill*, both against Indigenous people and the land, underscores the colonial project's ecological and cultural devastation. This mirrors Plumwood's argument that anthropocentrism fosters not only environmental degradation but also social injustices. In this sense, *Sarah Thornhill* becomes a poignant narrative of dispossession and ecological imbalance, reinforcing the urgent need to move beyond anthropocentrism and embrace a more inclusive, ethical relationship with the natural world.

3. INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN LIFE

Val Plumwood, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, underscores the deep interconnectedness between human and non-human life, highlighting how the human-centric colonization of the earth operates through a rational imperialism. She criticises this process for its selective benefits to certain groups of humans at the expense of others and of nature itself, emphasizing that many humans—including women and those deemed "less fully human"—are marginalized by its hierarchical structures. As Plumwood asserts:

“The human colonisation of the earth is human-centred in the competitive, chauvinistic sense that it benefits certain humans in the short term (although not in evolutionary terms) at the expense of other species. But it is not human-centred in any good sense, since not all humans share in or benefit from this process or from its ideology of rational imperialism. Indeed as in the case of other empires, many humans including women as well as those identified as less fully human are the victims of its rational hierarchy, just as many humans are the victims rather than the beneficiaries of the assault on nature” (Plumwood 12).

In *Sarah Thornhill*, the Australian landscape is portrayed as a living force, reflecting the deep interconnectedness of human and non-human life. The Hawkesbury River and the surrounding cliffs are not just passive settings but active agents influencing the characters’ emotions, actions, and survival. This portrayal aligns with Val Plumwood’s deep ecology, which critiques the anthropocentric view of humans as separate from nature and advocates for an ecological consciousness that sees all life forms as interconnected and interdependent. Grenville says, “That was how it was on Hawkesbury. Everything hidden away and those everlasting cliffs and ridges blocking us into the narrow valley. Would of liked to push them back, get a clear look at all the things people knew but wouldn’t say” (Grenville 17). It symbolizes the tension between the human desire to control and reshape nature and nature’s overwhelming, immovable presence. Plumwood’s deep ecology challenges this anthropocentric worldview, urging humans to recognize that they are not masters of the natural world but part of a larger ecological system. The landscape’s “hidden truths” and the characters’ struggle with it highlight the broader environmental and colonial themes of the novel, where human efforts to dominate the land are ultimately futile and damaging. The cliffs and ridges symbolize not just physical boundaries but also deeper knowledge about colonialism and the environment that humans often fail to understand due to their desire for control. Christian Diehm states, “Deep Ecology emphasizes a relational view of human beings, or includes special concern for human connectedness to nature” (Diehm 4), which underscores the interconnectedness of human and non-human life, reflecting how deep ecological perspectives recognize the essential bond between all living beings and the natural world. This perspective highlights the intrinsic bond between humans and the natural world, rejecting anthropocentrism and advocating for an eco-centric worldview. It suggests that human well-being is deeply intertwined with the health of the environment, encouraging actions that protect and restore ecological balance.

By focusing on this interconnectedness, deep ecology fosters a sense of responsibility and ethical commitment to preserving the natural world. The relationship between the characters and the environment is also spiritual, as Sarah describes the land as part of her very being, reflecting deep ecology’s call for a respectful, reciprocal relationship with nature. The landscape’s immovable features serve as a reminder that human control over the environment is limited, reinforcing the need for an ecological consciousness that values the intrinsic worth of the natural world.

Kate Grenville’s *Sarah Thornhill* illustrates the profound connection between humans and nature, as exemplified in the study. It states, “Our valley was deep, the sun came into it late. Gold on the hills all around before it reached down to us. A lovely time. That soft light, and knowing the sun would soon shine warm on you. Me and Jack. Nothing said because nothing needed to be” (Grenville 50). This imagery highlights the harmony between the characters and their environment, where natural rhythms influence their experience of time, warmth, and companionship, fostering a sense of belonging and unity with the landscape. The sun, hills, and light are not mere scenery but integral to the characters’ lives, creating a moment of harmony between human and non-human worlds. This moment of quiet understanding reflects an eco-centric consciousness, where humans and nature exist in a mutually beneficial relationship, attuned to the land’s rhythms and cycles.

Sarah Thornhill embodies deep ecology by illustrating that human life is intricately linked to the natural world, and any attempt to dominate or separate from it is both harmful and bound to fail. Plumwood’s philosophy emphasizes that humans must move beyond anthropocentrism and recognize the agency of the land, fostering a sustainable worldview that respects the interconnectedness of all life forms. The novel’s portrayal of the landscape and its influence on the characters’ identities and experiences reinforces the deep ecological idea that human and non-human worlds are inseparable and that their coexistence is essential to both human well-being and the environment’s health.

4. INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

In *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Plumwood explores the focus on culture marks a contrast with the kind of reverse ecological analysis, often originating in reductionist population biology, that reads the reductionism it adopts towards non-human species back into the human context and discounts the vital role of cultural difference, and

by implication, projects of cultural and social change that can help us acknowledge our ecological embeddedness (Plumwood32).

Indigenous ecological knowledge offers a counter-narrative to such reductionist approaches. Indigenous communities have long held and practiced complex, holistic understandings of the interconnectedness between humans, land, and non-human species. Their deep cultural insights integrate not only ecological systems but also social and spiritual dimensions, challenging modern, fragmented approaches that separate human and ecological relationships. Plumwood's critique resonates with Indigenous perspectives that advocate for cultural transformation—emphasizing reciprocity, respect for the land, and the importance of social and ecological harmony. By valuing cultural diversity and fostering inclusive, ethical frameworks for ecological stewardship, Indigenous knowledge systems contribute significantly to acknowledging and addressing our ecological embeddedness in a way that reduces harm and promotes sustainable coexistence.

Indigenous ecological knowledge is subtly yet powerfully woven into the narrative of *Sarah Thornhill*, providing a counterpoint to the colonial mindset that seeks to dominate and control the land. Through interactions with Indigenous characters like Jack, Grenville highlights the deep, interconnected relationship between Indigenous people and the environment. Jack's understanding of the land, its natural cycles, and its cultural significance reflects a rich, holistic knowledge system that respects and values the non-human world as an integral part of human existence. As Grenville illustrates, "Jack knew as much about the weather and boats as Pa, but clever enough to make out he didn't" (Grenville 35). This quote reflects Jack's practical, lived experience with the environment. His knowledge of the weather, seasonal changes, and navigation skills reflects an intimate understanding of natural systems, which are often passed down through oral traditions and direct engagement with the land. This not only highlights his technical proficiency but also his cultural wisdom, relational awareness, and deep connection to the environment.

In contrast, the colonial approach often dismisses Indigenous perspectives, seeking to reshape the land according to European ideals. These colonial attitudes, characterized by a desire for control and exploitation, result in the erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems. Through Val Plumwood's deep ecology framework, Sarah Thornhill critiques these colonial attitudes by emphasizing the necessity of respecting and integrating Indigenous ecological knowledge into broader discussions of environmental sustainability and ethical stewardship. By elevating Indigenous perspectives, Grenville underscores the importance of acknowledging these knowledge systems as vital for fostering a sustainable and inclusive relationship with the environment.

5. MORAL RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD THE LAND

Moral responsibility towards the land refers to the ethical obligation humans have to care for and respect the natural environment. This concept is rooted in the belief that humans are interconnected with the Earth and that the well-being of ecosystems is intrinsically linked to human well-being. In her work, Val Plumwood states:

"The deterioration of the global ecological context of human life demands from our species a clear and adequate response, but we are seemingly immobilised, even though it is clear that at the technological level we already have the means to accomplish the changes needed to live sustainably on and with the earth. So the problem is not primarily about more knowledge or technology; it is about developing an environmental culture that values and fully acknowledges the non-human sphere and our dependency on it, and is able to make good decisions about how we live and impact on the non-human world" (Plumwood3).

In *Sarah Thornhill*, the protagonist gradually confronts the moral implications of her family's actions, particularly their role in the massacre of Aboriginal people and the theft of their land. She experiences guilt and shame over her family's past, realizing the importance of ethical responsibility toward both the environment and those who have been wronged. This awareness aligns with Val Plumwood's deep ecology, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life and critiques the human-centred view that separates people from nature.

Sarah Thornhill examines "Rippling away into all those lives, down along the fathers and daughters and granddaughters. Generation after generation, the things joining us and the things cutting between us. All made by something done so long ago" (Grenville, 303). This study reflects how the consequences of human actions, such as colonialism and environmental harm, extend far beyond the immediate moment, influencing both people and ecosystems across generations. The colonial mindset toward the land is deeply rooted in a view of nature as a resource to be dominated and exploited for human gain. This perspective disregards the intrinsic value of the land, treating it as a means to further colonial

ambitions and economic prosperity. Such a mindset not only leads to the displacement and destruction of the natural environment but also overlooks the cultural and spiritual significance of the land for Indigenous peoples. Grenville critiques colonial attitudes that treat the land as a resource to be controlled, showing how such views result in environmental degradation and social injustice. As Sarah comes to terms with her family's colonial past, her growing awareness of these consequences mirrors the deep ecological principle of moral responsibility toward future generations and the environment.

Ultimately, *Sarah Thornhill* highlights the need to recognize the intrinsic value of all life and to shift from exploitation to respect, from dominance to coexistence. The novel underscores the idea that healing and reconciliation are necessary steps toward addressing historical injustices. Sarah's evolving consciousness mirrors a move away from exploitation and toward a more sustainable, respectful relationship with the land and its people, aligned with the values of deep ecology and ecological moral responsibility.

6. CONCLUSION

In *Sarah Thornhill*, Kate Grenville presents a powerful narrative that addresses the enduring impacts of colonialism and anthropocentrism, drawing upon Val Plumwood's deep ecology framework. The study justifies the complexities of indigenous knowledge, moral responsibility, and the interconnectedness of human and non-human life, offering a compelling critique of a colonial mindset that prioritizes human dominance over nature. Grenville emphasizes the need for ethical relationships with the land and the integration of Indigenous knowledge to foster a more sustainable approach to both environmental and cultural stewardship.

The study concludes how Grenville's work aligns with deep ecological principles, advocating for a worldview that respects the intrinsic value of all life forms. The novel serves not only as a reflection of past injustices but also as a call to contemporary society to foster inclusive and sustainable approaches to environmental and social challenges. Additionally, Grenville's vision encourages ongoing reflection on the impacts of colonialism and anthropocentrism, urging readers to engage with issues of environmental justice in ways that acknowledge the interconnectedness of all life. The possibilities for the Future research could explore how similar deep ecological perspectives are portrayed in other literary works or how these themes are addressed in various cultural and historical contexts. Through such researches, Grenville's vision of ecological interconnectedness continues to inspire meaningful dialogue and action.

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