

Writing Herself into History: Feminist Memoir and Colonial Re-Voicing in

Kate Grenville's A Room Made of Leaves

Miss. Sarandhini S

Full-time Scholar

Dept. of English

Dr. N.G.P Arts and Science College

Coimbatore – 48

Dr. M. Marimuthu

Assistant Professor

Dept. of English

Dr. N.G.P Arts and Science College

Coimbatore – 48

Abstract

This article investigates on Kate Grenville's *A Room Made of Leaves* as a feminist intervention into colonial historiography, believing that Grenville reconstructs female subjectivity using narrative methods such as silence, memoir, and performative identity. The novel which focuses on Elizabeth Macarthur, a historically neglected figure, reclaims women's power within patriarchal colonial frameworks by portraying loyalty as survival and silence as strategic resistance. The objective of this research is to examine Grenville's fictional memoir challenges traditional narratives, providing a feminist re-voicing of history that emphasizes cultural identity and gendered power. This study explores gender roles that are performed, rejected, and re-authored in settler colonial contexts, drawing on theoretical frameworks from Stephen Duncombe, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Simone de Beauvoir, and Judith Butler. As a literary record, Grenville's work challenges patriarchal historiography and is consistent with more general feminist discussions of agency, voice, and historical revisionism. The novel illustrates how storytelling may be used to reclaim suppressed histories and reshape cultural memory through Elizabeth's self-authorship. This article argues that *A Room Made of Leaves* functions as a feminist literary zine an act of resistance that transforms passive historical figures into active narrators of their own truth.

Key Words - Feminism, Colonialism, Historical Revisionism, Cultural Identity

Introduction

Kate Grenville's *A Room Made of Leaves* revisits Australia's colonial history from a feminist viewpoint and gives a voice to women who were often ignored or silenced. Elizabeth Macarthur's personal memory differs from the typical image of colonial women as submissive. Instead, it shows them as active individuals who had to deal with the limits of a male dominated society. The novel illustrates how memory, silence, and performance can serve not only to resist oppression but also as ways for women to fight back. Grenville creates her story as a way to rewrite history, opening up opportunities for new perspectives in literature on Australia's past.

Elizabeth Macarthur, historically overshadowed by her husband John Macarthur, is reimaged by Grenville as a woman who recognizes the restrictions placed on her and uses them to her advantage. Her silence is not a sign of submission but a strategic choice that allows her to observe, adapt, and influence her colonial surroundings. Grenville's depiction of Elizabeth reframes loyalty as a means of survival. It suggests that women's apparent compliance in patriarchal systems often hides deeper forms of agency. This complex portrayal challenges the traditional divide between victimhood and empowerment, highlighting the intricacies of female identity in colonial settings.

The complexity of female identity in colonial literature is revealed by Grenville's portrayal of Elizabeth, which reconstructs loyalty's dimension as a survival strategy and suggests that women's total compliance within patriarchal systems embodies deeper forms of agency. This symbolic depiction challenges the traditional binary of victimhood and

empowerment. Grenville transforms Elizabeth Macarthur, who is manipulated by her husband John Macarthur, into a woman who recognizes and utilizes the constraints placed upon her.

Elizabeth's silence is a deliberate tactic that enables her to observe, adjust, and have an impact on the colonial world around her. It does not imply weakness, submission, or capitulation to the grasp of men. The novel delves deeply into cultural identity as a performance. Elizabeth's ability to wear the "mask" that society assigned her while altering its meaning demonstrates the fluidity of identity and the power of self-authorship. Grenville also employs the metaphor to emphasize how women in colonial Australia were compelled to perform roles that denied them autonomy but managed to assert themselves within these constraints. Elizabeth challenges the patriarchal myths that excluded women and writes herself into history through the radical recovery of her memory.

Grenville's historical memory and her various storytelling devices demonstrate how fiction may serve as a means of regaining cultural territory. By prioritizing the stories of women, she challenges the conventional narrative and calls for a more inclusive understanding of Australia's colonial past. By giving women's voices a platform and placing them at the centre of the narrative, Grenville's book supports these concepts. In order to assist shape disadvantaged identities, the work emphasizes Stephen Duncombe's theories on cultural identity, which centre on subversion and resistance. and, when studied with feminist scholars like Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, can be viewed as a component of larger feminist discussions. Butler argue that gender is performed rather than fixed demonstrates how roles are socially constructed, and Mohanty reminds us that women's lives cannot be categorized without considering their unique histories, particularly in colonial backgrounds. Grenville's fiction contributes significantly to postcolonial studies and feminist writing. By giving Elizabeth Macarthur a voice, she challenges the patriarchal systems of colonial life while also prompting readers to consider the impact of silence today. Her work

demonstrates how narrative can be a vehicle for healing, resistance, and even reconsidering the significance of history.

With an emphasis on the reconstruction of female subjectivity in the setting of colonial literature, my research paper will examine the feminist aspects of Kate Grenville's historical fiction. This study also looks at how the patriarchal historiography that has historically suppressed women is challenged through the persona of Elizabeth Macarthur. Grenville's critique of colonial history is also described, along with an analysis of her use of narrative devices like performance, silence, and biography as symbols of action and resistance. By examining the author's work within the theoretical frameworks of gender and culture, this essay also explores her contribution to feminist studies. Additionally, this study demonstrates how Grenville's fiction continues to be an alternative narrative that empowers women and reshapes our view of history by highlighting the feminist interaction with colonial discourse.

Related Study

Many researches have been done concentrating on the works by Grenville especially *A Room Made of Leaves* with emphasis on feminist interpretation. The literature has pointed out Grenville as having deconstructed colonial discourse, especially regarding women experiences. In the work the topic of the colonial desire is addressed with regard to the race-gender-colonialism intersections. Staniforth presents a critical reading of domestic space in the works of Grenville which he says has dominated power struggles about gender in the colonial setting.

Pes also provides the comparative analysis of *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant*, and *Sarah Thornhill* by Grenville, dissecting the way they reveal the female subjectivity to challenge the colonial past. This is congruent with the argument by Haynes that the fiction of Grenville introduces feminist critique of Australian past with a special attention to the place of women in the colonial society. Scarpino examines how the female translator is portrayed in

piece of writing, and makes arrangements with the writings by Grenville, and the wider faction of feminist writing.

Despite great work in previous scholarship touching upon the feminist concerns of Grenville, certain spaces exist in the literature, especially regarding the concept of feminism and its relation to cultural identity. Although feminist criticism has been keen on highlighting the use of women in Grenville literature, it has always neglected the use of cultural identities and historical revisionism in her novels. The proposed study will provide responses to these gaps by discussing how the work of Grenville rewrites the Australian history re-visioned through experience with gender and the theme of cultural identity.

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses feminist theoretical approach so as to examine how women are represented using the Grenville novels. Analysis of the role of women and subjectivity within British colonial context will be based on the works of some of the most prominent feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. This paper will examine how gender roles are imposed as well as resistances to this imposing of roles in the respective novels especially in the settler-colonial context of Australia.

Also, the theory of cultural identity by Stephen Duncombe will be employed to interpret the underlying meaning of using fiction as verses to perform cultural identity by Grenville. The paper by Duncombe focuses on the execution, challenge, and creation of actions related to identity, mainly by the underrepresented people. Such a theoretical approach will assist in the investigations regarding how female characters created by Grenville constructed the process of reclaiming the identities and striving against the silence of their voices in the histories of colonial societies.

Rewriting Elizabeth Macarthur's Life from a Feminist Perspective

In her novel *A Room Made of Leaves*, Grenville reconstructs the life of Elizabeth Macarthur to challenge the historiography of colonial Australia. Elizabeth Macarthur, the presumed dutiful wife of John Macarthur, a leading figure in colonial society, has never had a biography of her own. Unlike other colonial wives of notable men, Elizabeth does not benefit from a life or biography that has been documented. Grenville explores this absence creatively to provide a feminist reframing of the narrative that views Elizabeth as a shrewd manipulator who participates in the colonial project within the gendered confines of her identity constrained by society.

Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity or trait but rather something that is constituted through repeated performance. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), she writes “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance.” (Butler 33). This means gender is not innate but enacted through clothing, speech, gestures, and behaviours. Butler’s theory destabilizes the binary view of gender (male/female) by showing how these roles are socially constructed and maintained through repetition. The theory of gender performativity by Butler breaks the rigidity of gender roles providing a perspective to see the interchangeability of gender identity especially in postcolonial countries. Borum and Chattoo most likely utilize Butler to argue against the notion that gender roles in postcolonial nations are “natural” or “traditional,” but rather that they are historically manufactured and open to reimagining. Colonial ideology that established strict binary classifications and patriarchal standards frequently influenced gender roles in postcolonial nations. Butler’s theory enables scholars to examine indigenous or precolonial gender diversity that colonization suppressed and to critique these legacies.

In the meantime, Chandra Talpade Mohanty blames Western feminism in making the experiences of women in the Global South homogenous and points to the existing need to

incorporate the dimensions of race, class, and colonial histories into the existing approach. The average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender and her being 'third world' (ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc). This homogenization erases cultural, historical, and political differences among women. In her seminal essay "Western feminist writing on women in the Third World must be considered in the context of global hegemony of Western scholarship. The production of the 'Third World woman' as a singular monolithic subject is a direct result of discursive colonization" (Mohanty 334).

Mohanty critiques how Western feminist scholarship often portrays women in the Global South as a monolithic, oppressed group. Talabi likely refers to a scholar who builds on Mohanty's work to critique contemporary feminist frameworks that still marginalize Global South voices. Talabi restates Mohanty's appeal to acknowledge the ways in which women's lives are influenced by their ethnic, class, and geopolitical contexts. She challenges the continuous tendency in Western feminist studies to overlook these aspects, even in contemporary global situations.

Grenville extends this feminist critique by rewriting Elizabeth Macarthur's life. Elizabeth interprets "loyalty" not as devotion but as "survival" (Grenville 112), demonstrating how women's roles, though constrained, involved strategies of resilience and subtle power. Her silence becomes strategic, showing that even compliance could mask hidden resistance. Later, Elizabeth asserts, "History has always been written by those who hold the pen... now I speak for myself" (Grenville 139), reclaiming authorship as an act of feminist defiance.

From this perspective, Grenville grants Elizabeth Macarthur not only agency but the complexity of a subtle strategist who has immense influence in the construction of every aspect of colonial society as a wife. Grenville permits her narrator to expose the gap between the

violence justifying the social order of the day and the domesticity women were expected to cherish and love. This gap highlights the paradox of women in colonial society, who largely benefited from, and were interned complicit to the systems that subjugated others, especially Indigenous peoples.

Grenville's retelling, the historical portrayal of Elizabeth Macarthur's life remained mostly trapped within the narrative of a passive, supportive figure behind her husband's accomplishments. Much focus was dedicated to John Macarthur's life a naval officer and one of the first successful commercially prominent sheep farmers in New South Wales. There was no depth given to Elizabeth's life; her identity was eclipsed by that of her husband's and her efforts were deemed a byproduct of a supportive wife to his aggressive colonial pursuits. Women in Elizabeth's social class were socialised to fulfil the nurturing role of a husband and family. They were not perceived as transformative agents with the ability to shape and alter the wider colonial narrative. Grenville's novel, however, shatters this perception.

Elizabeth's Understanding of Her Agency

In *A Room Made of Leaves*, Grenville empowers women of the colonial age by shifting the narrative to Elizabeth Macarthur. Elizabeth is not passive as she actively shapes her society; she fully understands her role in a patriarchal society, and her silence, loyalty, and perceived weakness are functional strategies of power. Her actions in response to rigid patriarchal norms in colonial society do not stem from surrendering to a dominant system, but from intelligent adaptation of prevailing structures.

Elizabeth writes:

What history calls loyalty, I call survival. I knew my place, but I also knew my power.

I could see the men around me, their egos, their ambitions, and I understood that I was more than just a wife. I was a player in this game, one who understood the rules, even

if I had to play my part quietly. But in silence, I held more power than anyone could have imagined (Grenville 112)

This passage underscores Elizabeth's skill to negotiate the colonial power systems without coming into direct conflict is highlighted in this chapter. Instead of being a sign of surrender, her quiet turns into a calculated decision. Elizabeth gains access to the inner circles of power by portraying herself as the obedient wife. She then uses her position to gently influence choices and mold the course of important events in colonial Australia.

From Grenville's feminist perspective, loyalty is defined as something much more complex and intentional than mere devotion. Survival is reinterpreted as Elizabeth's loyalty to her husband and the colonial endeavour. In a constrained structure of social and gendered hierarchy that essentially deprived women of all genuine agency, loyalty becomes a way for Elizabeth to maintain a semblance of her standing, to safeguard her possibilities, and to exert some semblance of influence. Her allegiance is a carefully planned form of a manufactured engagement that enables her to overcome and manipulate the patriarchal system in her favour rather than a simple and unconditional commitment.

The idea that women were merely helpless victims taken advantage of and mistreated by patriarchal regimes is refuted by Elizabeth's apparently paradoxical gesture of loyalty as a means of resistance. Elizabeth's allegiance is reframed as an act of agency, rather than disobeying her controlling husband's rules, she uses them to further her objectives. This change in how loyalty is understood challenges prevailing narratives and demonstrates the feminist idea that women can have some influence, even if it is severely limited.

Elizabeth reflects "The mask I wear is not mine; it is the one given to me. But I choose to wear it, and in that, I have power. I have learned to play the role expected of me, but in doing so, I make it my own. The mask does not define me; I define how it fits" (Grenville 182).

This passage illustrates how Elizabeth defies gendered norms by acting out a part while retaining her autonomy. In the conclusion, both novels discuss the intricate relationship between gender, identity, and power in a colonial setting, with Grenville's feminist revisionism providing fresh perspectives on how women negotiated, opposed, and transformed the repressive structures that surrounded them.

Lori Cox Han and Caroline Heldman who fought for gender equality, observes that "Power is not distributed equally... and gender remains a significant factor in determining who has access to political influence" (Han, Heldman 4). It highlights the persistent structural injustice that affects American political participation and representation. Han and Heldman argue that despite the nation's democratic ideals of equality, political power is still distributed unevenly along gender lines. This suggests the access to leadership roles, policymaking, and influence are still largely determined by gendered systems that favour men and marginalize women and people of colour. The quotation emphasizes that gender is not a minor or isolated factor, but rather a fundamental predictor of who receives attention and authority in political settings. It also underlines how institutional and cultural barriers, such as societal expectations, historical exclusion, and unequal access to networks, continue to limit women's opportunities for political participation. In essence, Han and Heldman draw attention to the ongoing gender gap in American politics and remind readers that achieving true equality requires more than simply representation, it also demands the dismantling of the structures that have traditionally upheld male supremacy in politics.

Elizabeth Macarthur reflects on her existence under John Macarthur's rule, particularly the fact that she is expected to be silent and submissive while she observes her husband consolidate power in the colony and at home. "John saw the world as something to be conquered. People were to be bent to his will, their obedience his due." (Grenville 57) Elizabeth frequently discusses John's political goals, his rage, and his constant urge to control everyone,

including her, throughout the novel. In a specific instance, John brags about his ideas and power after returning from his battles with the colonial authorities, ignoring Elizabeth's viewpoints as unimportant. Elizabeth knows that her position is unfair, but she is unable to confront him directly since, as a woman in the colony, her voice is powerless.

The Power of Silence: Elizabeth's Strategic Silence

The power of silence is another crucial theme in Grenville's retelling and women's voices were often silenced or dismissed, and they were expected to conform to the roles prescribed for them in the patriarchal colonial society. "In those days, a woman's silence was her safety. Her words could so easily be turned against her." (Grenville 34) Elizabeth uses her silence as a powerful tool to face the male dominated world around her and not as an act of submission. Her silence observes the actions of the men in her life, understands their motivations, and acts accordingly. Elizabeth holds control over her personal expression and manages to control the course of events without challenging the patriarchal structures through this subtle manipulation.

Grenville's reimagining of Elizabeth Macarthur's life subversively rewrites the historical text that has for so long muted women's voices in the context of the colonial project and is more than an act of voicing her. It is Elizabeth's memoir, which forms the core of the novel *A Room Made of Leaves*, and is an assault on the patriarchal historiography. She reconstructs the silenced female voice of a woman who resists the moral and social confinement imposed by colonial patriarchy. This resistance can be found in Sandra Manickam's article, *Destroying the Feminine Ideal: How 1990s Girl Zines Constructed Femininity in the United Kingdom*. According to Manickam, female zines from the 1990s served as countercultural forums where young women reclaimed control over their own identities by dismantling the "feminine ideal" that was promoted by the media. By turning a

historically passive colonial wife into a narrator who reveals the hypocrisies of empire and gender, Grenville zines the past she writes against prescribed femininity using a personal, confessional tone that challenges patriarchal historiography. Grenville's re-voicing of Macarthur accomplishes a similar act of feminist subversion. Both Elizabeth from Grenville and the zine writers from Manickam produce alternate archives of women in which identity, authorship, and memory are transformed into acts of revolt. Using this perspective, *A Room Made of Leaves* can be interpreted as a colonial literary zine that challenges the submissive, moral lady and substitutes it with a complex, self-defining female character.

In the novel, Elizabeth Macarthur takes charge of her life narrative, historiography her own version of it. She defies the status quo as she writes her memoir, ensuring she is not overshadowed by her husband's narrative. Elizabeth declares "History has always been written by those who hold the pen. This is my version. For too long, I have been silent, a footnote in someone else's story. Now, I speak for myself. The past is mine to tell, not anyone else's to control" (Grenville 139).

By writing her own memoir, instead of being merely a footnote in her husband's tale, Elizabeth reclaims her identity and places herself at the centre of colonial history. By questioning the conventional narratives that have downplayed women's contributions and excluded them, this act of self-authorship is a type of historical revisionism.

Cultural Identity as Performance

Grenville also uses the theme of cultural identity as performance in *A Room Made of Leaves*. Elizabeth is forced to perform the role expected of her within the rigid constraints of colonial society, yet she does so in a way that allows her to retain a sense of personal agency. This performance of identity is not a form of compliance, but a strategy through which Elizabeth can navigate the gendered expectations placed upon her. Elizabeth reflects "The

mask I wear is not mine; it is the one given to me. But I choose to wear it, and in that, I have power. I have learned to play the role expected of me, but in doing so, I make it my own. The mask does not define me; I define how it fits.” (Grenville 182).

This passage speaks to the idea that identity is not fixed but fluid. Elizabeth understands that she must play the roles imposed upon her, but she also understands that she can control how those roles are enacted. This self-awareness allows her to resist being defined by the patriarchal system and instead, defines herself on her own terms.

By centring Elizabeth’s story and giving her the power to tell her own narrative, Grenville creates a feminist act of historical re-appropriation. Elizabeth’s decision to write her own memoir is not just an attempt to correct the historical record; it is an assertion of her voice and agency in a world that has long denied women their place in the narrative of history. Elizabeth writes “What is history if not the stories we choose to tell about ourselves? This is my story, and I will tell it as I lived it. I have waited long enough for others to define me, but now, I write my own name into the narrative of history. This is my reclamation, my truth.” (Grenville 201)

Through self-authorship, Elizabeth reclaims her past and reshapes the colonial narrative as she sees fit. In doing so, she counters the dominant historical narrative which, for centuries, has marginalised and erased women. Elizabeth’s memoir stands as a personal reclamation and as a collective feminist gesture, an effort to restore women’s voices to the historical record.

In *A Room Made of Leaves*, Kate Grenville bestows upon Elizabeth Macarthur a voice that has been absent from historical discourse. Grenville’s re-imagining of Elizabeth’s life not only redefines a historical figure but simultaneously contests the prevailing patriarchal historiography that has sidelined women. Elizabeth’s silence, her possessive gaze on structures of power, and her attempts to rewrite the past epitomise fundamental feminist struggles to

reclaim agency, contest oppressive forces, and firmly place women's contributions on the historical landscape.

Through memory, voice, resistance, and historical revisionism, Kate Grenville's *A Room Made of Leaves* focus on the years of the Australian colonial period and the roles women played during this time, inspecting from a novelistic angle. Elizabeth Macarthur is such a woman who in the last few centuries, have been unjustly overlooked. However, Grenville gives agency and voice to them. The protagonists seek to reclaim the objectives of the past by rewriting history in order to include their narratives. This demonstrates the feminist belief that history, in its bare essence, is subjective and reworkable in order to allow the void cast of the marginalised to be filled. In *A Room Made of Leaves*, Elizabeth Macarthur seeks to counter the submission of women throughout history by men by reclaiming that history through the act of penning her own self-told memoir, where history is something that is imposed and controlled. The recovery that comes with self-silencing and the reclamation of their voices that have been subdued through colonial narratives is woven throughout the novels. The process of self-reflection wherein colonisers perceived themselves is as a feminist act that offers subversion to the domination is in its essence colonised.

Elizabeth's choice to assert herself by writing about her life instead of allowing her husband to chronicle it passively shifts her identity from that of an adjunct spouse to an active collaborator in the colonial endeavour. The stories of both women exemplify the concept of historical revisionism as they reconstruct their cultural identities whilst navigating the ingrained systems of patriarchy, not as acts of surrender, but as calculated revolt.

As Grenville writes in *A Room Made of Leaves*:

"The past is a story we tell, and in telling it, we reclaim it" (Grenville 217).

This highlights the theme that history is malleable and that reclaiming one's voice and identity is a form of resistance. Through Sarah and Elizabeth, Grenville reconfigures colonial history to emphasize the important roles women played, challenging the traditional narratives that have long excluded them.

Conclusion

A Room Made of Leaves by Kate Grenville is not merely historical fiction novels, they are also strong feminist works, in which the author revisits the past to recreate the history of Australian colonization through the voices of women. The novel is highly preoccupied with issues of gender, power and cultural identity and provide a critical reading of the manner in which the experience of women has been relegated or denied in patriarchal and colonial discourses. Through re-appropriation of the feminine voice and regeneration of written history, the works by Grenville question the conventional ways in which women were portrayed in historical accounts of colonial contexts and induce readers to question the overlap of feminism and colonialism and its relation with identity.

A Room Made of Leaves presents a philosophically re-imagined history of the life of Elizabeth Macarthur as a passive figure of the colonizer history. The fictional memoir structure used by Grenville enables Elizabeth to take ownership of her narrative and make her the central participant in history as opposed to being a footnote in the annals of colonial society. Through the narrative of Elizabeth, the novel is also a remarkable feminist recapture of history, a feminist re-appropriation of history- one which confronts silencing of women, hence restoring their presence in history.

The strength of female agency in discriminatory structures using the idea of performance of identity, the masks used by women and the roles they unwillingly have to play. Her novels were crafted in different forms of narrative styles, they still explore some common

themes of memory, voice, resistance, and historical revisionism. The relevance of women to the rewriting of history through influencing historical discourse and fighting patriarchal authority can be seen in the work by Grenville. She employs disparate narrative devices: to reconstruct the past through a feminist prism and to bring people traditionally erased in history to speech and it is possible to notice that, in emphasizing the same intentions, it shows the clash of gender and cultural identity and these are part of the battle that women undergo in society to stand their ground, or rather be heard. The work by Grenville is central to feminist work when it comes to the critique of the patriarchal, colonialist as well as the way in which Australian history has been constructed. She asks the readers to re-evaluate the heritage of our history and to adopt a broader, more feminist viewpoint in her novels, which takes account of women as a major force in creating our picture of the past. Grenville makes a critical intervention into the story of the historical narrative by being able to centre her story around the lives of women in the colonial Australia, possibly reclaiming some space on behalf of the women but making it clear that their place in the narrative of history belongs to them.

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