

**Bridging Culture and Self: Unravelling Identity in Kate Grenville's  
*The Idea of Perfection***

Ms. G. Beulah Hephzibah  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Holy Cross College (Autonomous)  
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University  
Tiruchirappalli-620 002

Dr. Mary Sandra Quintal  
Research Supervisor  
Head and Associate Professor  
Department of English  
Holy Cross College (Autonomous)  
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University  
Tiruchirappalli – 620 002

**Abstract**

Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection* is the story of the small town of Karakarook, and of Douglas Cheeseman and Harley Savage, two people who seem the least likely in the world to fall in love. Set against the backdrop of contemporary rural Australia, the novel examines the interplay between economic development, historical conservation, and the tourism industry. The novel has won Britain's 2001 Orange Prize for Fiction. A person's identity is determined by various factors. This identity can be split into cultural identity and personal identity. This research paper is an attempt to identify a person in terms of culture and as a self. Material Culture enables to define culture and society of a person through their relationship with material objects that they use, possess and are surrounded with. On the other hand, Non-Material Culture such as ideas and beliefs explore the shaping of an individual's personal identity. The objectives of the paper are to analyse the cultural identity of the characters in the novel *The Idea of Perfection* by Kate Grenville through the concept of Material Culture and to examine the personal identity of the personages using the concept of Non-Material Culture. The finding discloses that both the material objects and ideologies shape an individual's identity.

**Keywords:** Cultural Identity, Personal Identity, Individual, Tangible Objects, Ideologies

Material Culture enables to define culture and society of a person through their relationship with material objects that they use, possess and are surrounded with. The material objects could include tools, artwork, buildings and weapons. These objects explore their symbolic representation thereby identifying a person's cultural background. A contradictory concept, being Non-Material Culture include ideas and beliefs explore the shaping of an individual's personal identity. The ruling power has a major part in the lives of the people by formulating laws and rules which every individual is expected to follow. This creates a person's psyche becoming his habit, in turn shaping his personal identity.

Historians study the past through the fossils and other artifacts. This idea is adapted into the study of literature as the literary texts serve as the physical materials for the study of historical matters. Thus, the idea of studying culture through objects is adopted from

archaeology and has become interdisciplinary with anthropology, sociology and literature. The theory of Material Culture is made popular by Leslie A. White and James Deetz.

Kate Grenville is an Australian novelist. She was born in Sydney, Australia in 1966. She has written various novels on historical fiction highlighting the themes of class, race and gender in colonial and contemporary Australia. She has also contributed short story collection and non-fiction in the field of literature. She has won various literary awards including the Australian/Vogel Literary Award for her novel *Lilian's Story*, the Victorian Premier's Literary Prize for *Dark Places*, the Orange Prize for *The Idea of Perfection* in 2001, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for *The Secret River* in 2006 and so on.

Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection*, winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2001 is a witty and wildly entertaining novel. Two outsiders meet for the first time in the small fictional town of Karakarook, New South Wales. Douglas Cheeseman is an expert bridge builder who comes to Karakarook to build a concrete bridge replacing the timber one and Harley Savage, who endured three divorces and suffered a heart attack has come with a bent self to Karakarook to work in the heritage museum which represents Sydney Museum of Applied Arts.

Though the bridge is visibly weakened, it is structurally stable enough to stand as a pride of the region further long years. It has become the wild debate in the town whether to preserve the old bent bridge to display the rich tradition or to give way for the new bridge by demolishing it. But the novel speaks something more than the external bridge issue. That is, the internal building of emotional bridge between Douglas and Harley is the main plot. They have gone through a lot in their life and bent like the bridge, but not broken.

The other characters in the novel are Felicity Porcelline, the bank manager's wife has been haunted by the idea of perfection, i.e., her thought of being non-racist makes her too friendly for anyone. The Chinese butcher Alfred Chang loves Felicity and fascinates her with his masculine physique and subtle butchery actions.

This research paper is an attempt to identify a person in terms of culture and as a self. The objectives are to analyse the cultural identity of the characters in the novel *The Idea of Perfection* by Kate Grenville through the concept of Material Culture and to examine the personal identity of the personages using the concept of Non-Material Culture.

The first concept of the research analysis is made on the basis of materialism. The cultural background and identity of the characters in the novel *The Idea of Perfection* are defined through their connection with the tangible objects, using the concept of Material Culture. Douglas Cheeseman is the male protagonist. The physical objects that reveal his ethnicity are many, but for the study, a white ute and the Bent Bridge are taken. The former one is his possession and the latter is his profession. Analysing culturally, the white ute personifies Douglas himself. Ute, otherwise known as a pickup truck is a utility vehicle mostly connected to Australia for its popularity and being a common mode of transportation. The white ute that Douglas possesses symbolically represents that he is from a white European descent, a son of a proud VC who shifted to Australia for his living. This ultimately reveals his hybrid identity that he is a European Australian.

Doughlas, being a bridge builder is sent to Karakarook to demolish an old bent bridge. The two well-known bridges: London Bridge and Gladesville Bridge are taken into study. The Bent Bridge in the novel symbolically represents Gladesville Bridge in New South Wales. Both bridges share few similarities such as the bent structure and the building components. This similarity creates a resistance within Doughlas to break down that bridge. He picturizes the Bent Bridge to be identical with the London Bridge which stands as a prestigious monument of the Great Britain. The decision of rebuilding the bridge with the concrete might have entertained him, but he dislikes the idea of wrecking it out for a renewal. This affirms his European ancestry though his present habitation is in Australia.

Subsequently, the working place of Harley Savage has something to exhibit her cultural identity. Harley has come to Karakarook to help in the building of the Karakarook Heritage Museum. The setting of the place, that is the museum makes it easy to study about culture as the chosen concept of Material Culture has its origin straight from archaeology. Being a museum curator, she is appointed to preserve the rich heritage of Australia. Through this, it is evident that the museum had made a right thing in choosing a woman from the British background, who during the colonial rule preserved their culture, when the whole world was vandalized.

Harley being a real woman, materialises a dog. Generally, though dog comes under the category of the living, the experiences her life gave makes her objectify the dog instead of looking it as a soulful creature. It is the “idea of adoration” which will be dealt in the later part of the research paper. The dog in Lorraine Smart’s house is with Harley at home and wherever she goes. More than expecting her to feed it, the poor creature likes the company of her. It often nudges her showing its love and expecting it back from her. But for Harley, the company of dog is more annoying. She seldom cares about it when at home or on the road, other than feeding. It is not that she dislikes the dog but because she doesn’t want to be encaptured by its unconditional love. So, she frequently yells at it to keep it few distance away from her.

Another woman of the European descent in the novel is Felicity Porcelline. She is the wife of Karakarook bank manager Hugh and is blessed with a son named William. Being a modelling woman, Felicity’s imaginations on mere persons and situations are often out of the world. She is offered fruits by Alfred Chang. Though being her secret lover, Chang is absolutely innocent in giving her the strawberries cultivated from his garden, this seriously bothers her. Felicity perceives the strawberries as a symbol of infidelity that emerges out of passion and carnal affection which is a long-held belief in the English society. It turns out that she is allergic to them. In the end, she gets rid of them by burning it into ashes resembling her love for Chang surely has to be concluded in one of such ways some day for her happy family life with Hugh to be prolonged.

The second concept of the research analysis is more on the ground of ideologies. The dominant power formulates ideas, beliefs, laws and rules that a person should follow. This forms his mental component thus, shaping his personal identity. In the case of Doughlas and Harley, their partners rise themselves to the place of the dominant power in the family. The

chiding of their spouses on the mistakes of their partners lead to their divorce, leaving them in a situation to search out for that which is right and ideal in the imperfect world. Thus, the “Idea of Perfection” is conceived in the mind of Douglas and Harley. Harley’s marital life experience gave her another philosophy called the “Idea of Adoration”. While in the case of Felicity, the idea of perfection is not the one hatched by her husband’s superiority but by her own modelling fantasy. She also suffers with the “Idea of Normality” especially when around the Chinese butcher.

Douglas lived with his wife Marjorie for some years. She is an amateur in carpentry. Her characters are more similar to the modelling woman Felicity. Marjorie likes decking her house with her carpentry skills. While Douglas is a gawky man who wishes to be hidden from the sight of the world. And for this her wife often calls him idiot. This creates the search in his mind for that which is wise. The idea of perfection leaves Douglas to explore an ideal self. He often imagines another man in his place who could do everything perfectly unlike him. Being a shy person, he pushes himself to be an extrovert in the public sphere but all his attempts pitifully fail. He dislikes to be watched by the people, even a cow’s look is enough to make him feel uncomfortable.

“Another sort of man, he knew, would be able to make the best of the Caldenonian. Another sort of man would nip down to the public bar for a beer, where it would be cooler. He would read the paper, watch the trots on the telly. Would get a conversation going with the man next to him at the bar about the way the country was going to the pack. He wished he could be such a man.” (Grenville 5)

Douglas is often met by sociable people who makes him feel inferior. He struggles to maintain his smile and often tries to quit a conversation even before it starts. But when caught in some unavoidable situation, he would sweat, trying to put all his mind and body to answer simple yes or no questions in a casual conversation. Douglas experienced such uneasy situation with Chook, the Leading Hand. To make him feel even worse, Chook bugs him with his words and damages his white ute with his reckless driving. It is only when Chook gets off from his ute, that Douglas and his ute let out a sigh of relief from the grip of an extravagant. Chook’s careless driving is described skilfully in the novel mirroring how it made Douglas to go sick of him.

Harley’s idea of perfection is comparably same with that of Douglas. She has been through three divorces in her life. But each annulment rips her little by little to look out for what it means by perfection in the world. The first husband leaving her for another pretty woman presses her to search out for what is a perfect woman that can entertain a man’s heart. Harley addresses herself as “a dangerous steak” after her separation from the arrogant second husband. Her refusal to look into his eyes made him act brutal one night and she took the blame on herself.

Harley’s last husband left a living wound in her by committing suicide. This act of him explicitly affirms both directly and symbolically that she could never be a perfect wife and this idea leaves Harley to stop searching out for a man to share her life with. From all

these life experiences, she ultimately understands that she is an unconventional woman who cannot fit into any typical mould of societal expectations. She exclaims this saying, “That Harley Savage was someone she could try to be, but in the end, it was too difficult” (Grenville 40)

The self-same experiences also conceive the idea of adoration in Harley’s mind. She is a plain big woman who was never and cannot be cherished at all. About her idea of adoration, Grenville says, “Being adored was something she had come to mistrust. She felt adoration to be a small and lovely-looking bomb that could blow up in your face at any time.” (Grenville 40).

Harley is very much familiar with the act of being loved for sometimes which would all of a sudden turns out to be a menace. This is also the reason for her not wishing to accompany the dog. She believes that the more loving the dogs crawl in her lap, the much sooner it will bite out a pound of flesh from her. And for this reason, she even refuses to buy dogs for his sons. Harley calls adoration as a small and lovely looking bomb.

Felicity’s idea of perfection is a superficial perfection found in women’s magazines which is mostly materialistic such as a white lily, lemon coated floor, etc. In her life, perfection is the betterment of living standards. Like Marjorie, she loves to deck her rooms and to groom herself. This appearance-based improvisation makes Felicity an object of admiration in Alfred Chang Superior Meats shop. “She hated the way she kept on exclaiming and smiling but she did not know what she might do if she stopped.” (Grenville 24)

Felicity faces tough atmosphere in Chang’s meat shop. Her idea of normality haunts her not to be judged in any situation that her accent and action sounds racist. For this, she tries to be more casual in her conversation in which she successfully fails most often. Such behaviour makes her friendly drawing the attraction of the Chinese butcher to her.

Material Culture analysis discloses the hybrid identity of Doughlas by examining the physical things he possessed. Harley’s idea of adoration makes her to perceive the dog as an object and her job in the museum exposes the British cultural background. The materialistic woman Mrs. Porcelline is caught unloyal by the symbolism of the big berries. Thus, the concept of material culture unveiled in the cultural identity of the characters in the novel using the tangible objects that surround them. The ideologies such as the idea of perfection, the idea of adoration and the idea of normality formed the psyche of the personages in the novel thus proving the concept right.

Another interesting conclusion is also found out. The concepts of analysing cultural identity and personal identity are brought into fusion with this finding. That is, the ideas and beliefs that shape an individual’s personal identity are actually shaped by the material objects. In this way, the concept of material culture unravels the cultural and person identity of the characters in the novel *The Idea of Perfection*, thereby bridging the culture and self.

### Works Cited

Ames, Kenneth L. *Material Culture: A Research Guide*. 1985.

Cantril, Hadley. "A Psychological Reason for the Lag of 'Non-Material' Culture Traits."  
*Social Forces*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1935, pp. 376–79. *JSTOR*,  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2570400>.

Grenville, Kate. *The Idea of Perfection*. Pan Macmillan, 2010

MERGEN