

Robin Jenkins: perspectives on the postcolonial

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Robin Jenkins' engagement with 'postcolonialism' can be understood in two ways, both stemming from personal experience. First, the fiction based upon his early years working as a teacher abroad, in Afghanistan and in Sabah (then part of North Borneo), directly addresses the contexts in which western powers maintained power bases, examines the last days of imperialist attitudes and explores the spectrum of complex ethnic tensions which these produced. Secondly he drew upon those experiences to develop understanding of the ways in which Scotland itself can be understood in terms of both a colonised country and a colonising power. In both instances Jenkins' characteristically interrogative and scrutinising focus is used to ask difficult questions and make his readers appreciate the absence of easy answers.

Jenkins taught in Afghanistan (Ghazi School, Kabul, 1957-9), Spain (British Institute, Barcelona, 1959-61) and in Malaysia at Gaya College, Sabah, North Borneo (1961-65), before returning to teach in Dunoon Grammar School in 1968. In the novels written about these experiences his consistent interest in complex moral questions is sustained but invigorated by an increasingly diverse range of characters and plot possibilities; it is also sharpened through appreciation of the tense political implications of human weaknesses when played across a global stage. Jenkins was in Afghanistan during a period in which Russian and U.S. powers were vying for control; the *burqa* was made optional rather than

compulsory there in 1959; Sabah, where he worked, gained independence by becoming, as North Borneo, part of the new state of Malaysia in 1963. Fiction by Jenkins at this period is therefore best understood as written at a historical moment, the movement into 'post' colonialism, rather than knowingly informed by what we might now understand as the perspectives of postcolonial theory, however problematic these may have become.

'Difference' had real and dramatic dimensions in the contexts he lived and worked: that intensity informs the fiction he produced from them. But, as Michael Gardiner has noted, the term 'postcolonialism' 'does not just designate a country detaching chronologically after decolonisation; it is also more fundamentally a critique working within various forms of empire.'¹ Jenkins certainly offers 'critique' in his fiction but, as always in his writing, that critique is complicated, challenges easy categorisation and, as this essay suggests, produces its own problematics.

In one of his most powerful novels, *Dust on the Paw*, written on his return from teaching in Afghanistan, two moments exemplify the author's complicated engagement with postcolonial cultures.² The first is typical of Jenkins in its sense of irony: when the British residence gives its annual Birthday Garden Party the Ambassador is dismayed at the tattered state of the Union Jack flag. The mice had eaten large holes in it and 'parts of the Empire were missing'. Ransacking the embassy's resources to find replacement material of the right red colour they realise that 'by far the best match turned out to be an old pair of the Consul's underpants, which his wife, anxious to redeem him in his master's eyes, offered without this consent' (p. 240). Writing at a time when the power of the British Empire was itself becoming increasingly ragged, the unsavoury and ridiculous object holding the flag together embodies the parodic understanding of colonial performance which Jenkins sees in

the English abroad, while also suggesting an insalubrious pragmatism in their attempts to retain the façade of authority. The fact that duplicity is forced on to individuals and is enacted through gender divisions and amidst a troubling marriage is also highly characteristic of the novel and of Jenkins' interest in configuring the politics of difference at domestic, national and international levels.

A second passage which demonstrates both the complex perspective of the author on such issues and his characteristic mode of blending narrative simplicity with the provocation of ambiguous responses comes late in the novel. Abdul Wahab, a Nuranian trained in England and wanting to marry the woman he met in Manchester, a man caught up by both accident and design in the unstable politics of his native land, takes a taxi journey to meet with the local potentate, uncertain both of his forthcoming marriage and his professional career:

All the way to the heart of the city these human contrasts or contradictions rather kept leaping to his notice. For instance, the taxi-driver had pasted up on the cracked windscreen the coloured picture of an Indian actress, with breasts like melons about to roll out of a purple bag; yet the driver himself was thin and quite ugly, with a half-healed boil on the back of his neck. Then there were two donkeys making their water copiously under one of the triumphal arches. Along the streets decorated to celebrate freedom, brutal-faced policemen scowled and strutted. A large pink Buick car [...] crept behind a camel cart in which were crouched a nomad family with all their belongings [...].

Yet the strange thing was that [...] Wahab did not feel cowed or depressed; on the contrary, he was elated with a sense of illimitable possibilities. All his sentimental hopes were surely realisable in a world of such shocking variety; his tears, in fact, were pearls. (pp. 353-4)

Key to Jenkins' engagement with postcolonialist contexts is this sensitivity to contrast and contradiction. The focus on contrast in some ways appears a typically orientalist perspective, reinforcing that emphasis which can be used, as Edward Said suggests, to 'Other' the East by stressing its distinctiveness from the West as exotic, different, plural and

the unstable: the 'Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'.³ In this passage from *Dust on the Paw* the world depicted brings together different phases of social and cultural development in 'shocking variety'. But Jenkins simultaneously deploys this idea of contradiction as a scalpel through which to incise facile notions of difference. Wahab is both a figure who challenges the dominant local power structures and the values of the expatriate community while at the same time embodying perspectives produced by colonial oppression. While Orientalism 'is premised upon exteriority', Wahab is at the same time a product and evaluator of the culture being categorised.⁴

The distinctions Wahab both criticises and embodies are produced by ethnic and cultural difference. He is consistently alert to the dynamics of skin colour: 'Was not the fat, fair-haired Englishmen married to a woman whose skin was yellow and whose eyes were narrower than a Mongol's? (At this point Wahab turned so that the sunlight shone on his hand; once again he saw that his skin could easily be taken for that of a European, nicely sunburnt.' (p. 117) And later: 'Now, as he stared at the almost black Maftoon, he remembered how he himself in that very room had admired the paleness of his own hand.' (p.233). As if to exemplify Franz Fanon's psychoanalytic theories of the colonialist construction of dependency and inferiority set out in *Black Skin, White Masks* (first appearing in French in 1952, although only gaining international acclaim in the 1980s), Jenkins creates in Wahab a character who sees with the eyes of the dominant culture at the same time as he is presenting a serious challenge to its hierarchies: 'The black man stops behaving as an *actional* person. The goal of his behaviour will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth.'⁵

The complexity of response this evokes in the reader is reinforced by that reluctance to settle on or in a single perspective which is so characteristic of Jenkins; his deployment of multiple points of views intensifies our consciousness of different ways of seeing and of different value systems, moral, social and cultural, which clash in uncomfortable ways. In *Dust on the Paw* this emphasis on a range of characters and their perspectives, however dissonant that assemblage may be, is one of the novel's strengths, making it a significant advancement on *Some Kind of Grace*, published in the previous year and again dealing with postcolonial contexts but through the perspective of one (albeit conflicted) man.⁶ *Some Kind of Grace* adopts a genre closer to action adventure than most of Jenkins' fiction in its plot structured around John McLeod's quest to find out the fate of his friend Donald Kemp and his partner, Margaret, who appear to have been murdered in the mountains to the north of Kabul. It confines itself to his perspective, even if that is a self-questioning and shifting one. While the novel is consistent with much of Jenkins' fiction in its nagging exploration of the boundaries between extreme goodness and madness, focused on Kemp and Margaret, it insistently examines McLeod's own attitudes, shaped through the articulation of prejudices which he himself is forced to re-evaluate. So, his response to the villagers of Haimir, suspected of the Westerners' murders, embodies a construction of primitivism – 'these people had not reached the stage of morality; baboons he had thought of, baboons he thought of again' (p.113) – that later changes to a recognition of their dignity and communality. Other modes of behaviour, such as those of the wild hill-men who capture him and engage in bloody battle with each other, are not redeemed: 'the sight and feel and even the smell of all that blood could not so easily be washed away.' (p. 105) In terms of morality, *Some Kind of Grace* retains its doubts and ambiguities until the end: in their adherence to different models of religion which, when realised in practice, are both

damaging and inspiring, both colonisers and colonised appear to collude in networks of necessary lies.

Some Kind of Grace also deploys, more consistently than later novels, Scotland as a frame of reference. Kemp and McLeod share a background of Scottish university days and Scottish mountaineering expeditions, which McLeod draws on to familiarise and ground his experiences. There are frequent references to similarities in the landscape – he might have been a climber coming down from Rothiemurchas’ (p. 136), listening to sheep he ‘felt he might have been back in Wester Ross’ (p. 144), a fort reminds him of ‘Edinburgh Castle’ (p. 39). James Meek suggests that further parallels can be found between McLeod’s emotional movement from ‘contempt through an unpleasant disgust to admiration, almost an implied envy’ and ‘the emotions expressed by English and Lowland visitors to the remote glens and islands of Scotland hundreds of years ago’.⁷ Certainly that interest in notions of primitivism, translated from Scotland to different contexts, is one Jenkins shared with a key influence, R.L. Stevenson. But McLeod’s discomfort with Kemp’s suddenly talking to him in Gaelic suggests not only that he is ‘troubled by the Gaelic words and associations of home’ (p. 170) but also that the novel is pushing for a more sceptical attitude to such easy analogies. The conclusion of *Some Kind of Grace* also serves as a stern reminder of the very different economic contexts in which different countries operate. The motivation behind much of the plot transpires to be commercial and political, as both Russia and America seek to exploit Afghanistan’s unmined wealth in its natural resources.

Scotland may, as Meek implies, have been exploited and provoked but it has also participated and benefitted from these processes of exploitation. As Gardiner notes:

‘Scottish literature as a counter-discipline [...] has rather frequently acted as a set of political interventions against the idea that literary value arises from a single pre-given cultural source, a stance which aligns it closely with the postcolonial. Nevertheless, the relationship between Scotland and ex-colonies or neo-colonies remains one of simultaneous solidarity and conflict.’⁸ In his short stories, such as the title story in *A Far Cry from Bowmore*, Jenkins draws the reader’s attention to such parallels between Scotland and the countries he lived in while also interrogating them. In the short story ‘Siddiq’, for example, the assertion made by a Scot to the Afghani central character - ‘We’re a highland race, like you. We’re poor like you too’ - both establishes a connection and calls into question exactly what is meant by ‘poverty’ in these very different contexts.⁹

Writing from the perspective of the coloniser, albeit an uncomfortable one, allows such contradictions and inconsistencies to be explored: Jenkins was clearly attracted to this as a device. *The Tiger of Gold* (1962) written from the point of view of Sheila McNair, a young woman working in ‘Nurania’ who falls in love with a young Indian man, adopts this formula of an external perspective on colonised people and colonial cultures.¹⁰ *The Expatriates* (1972) also focuses on the relationships across a racial divide, but opens in Scotland as Ronald McDonald confesses to his fiancée Margaret Ormiston that he has had a child while in Malaysia.¹¹ The novel then follows their journey, accompanied by his mother, to find and reclaim that child. This novel therefore situates itself explicitly in the intersections of Scotland and the ‘Other’, not just by the fact that it opens in a Scottish-village setting which could almost be that of a Kailyard novel, thereby creating a literary frame of reference and expectation shortly to be disrupted, but also because it sustains a discursive Scottish presence: Margaret, for instance, ‘is firmly placed within a Covenanting Christian tradition’;

McDonald lives at “Martyrs Brae’ and one the characters remarks: ‘As colonialists we never get ourselves disliked like the sassenachs’. But the dynamic (reiterated in *Some Kind of Grace*) also alerts the reader to the problematic understanding of the ‘native’ as pertaining to Scotland and the colonial context. Margaret, for example, seeks to keep those connections distant: she ‘would never forgive anyone who forced her into recognising her own primitiveness.’ (p. 20) These novels therefore compel us into awareness, although not endorsement, of western perspectives and Scotland’s ambiguous relationship to them

Each of Jenkins’ novels set in the lands he lived in creates a vivid depiction of colonial power in its latter days: the fact that characters from novels are transposed – Bob Gillie and Alan Wint appear in several as British officials – indicates both the wealth of material for his critique of the hypocrisy and hierarchies of that world, its internal politics and problems, and the confidence with which he addressed it. Bernard Sellin suggests that: ‘Most of his foreign books give a harsh, sardonic view of the expatriate community where gin and lechery lead to sordid adventures and where gossip, jealousy and stupidity are the norms. Even those who mean well often find themselves trapped in their own contradictions or carried away by decisions which they can no longer control’ and argues that a ‘satirical excess’ can inflect such engagements.¹² While Jenkins asserted that it was the duty of the Scottish novelist ‘to write about what he knows best’, his novels set in foreign territories are, as Sellin argues, more interested in cultural confrontation than the behavior of Scots aboard.¹³ Certainly the idea of the challenges produced by clashing values and expectations continued to preoccupy him.

The relatively late novel *Leila* (1995) returns to the theme of interracial relationships.¹⁴ Here too, in the narrative of middle-aged and hitherto self-centred Scottish teacher, Andrew

Sandiland, falling in love with and marrying the politically active, intelligent and beautiful lawyer, Leila Azaharri, the consciousness of the Scottish role in maintaining imperialism is articulated, most explicitly when a rebellion led by Leila is quashed by soldiers of the British army who turn out to be Scottish: 'Scottish troops had often been used by the English to build up their Empire and then defend it.' p. 236). Focusing on the expatriate's viewpoint allows Jenkins to analyse again that uncomfortable duality of position between oppressed and, arguably, exploited colonial oppressors.

Two of Jenkins' novels, however, move significantly beyond the perspective of the colonizer, producing powerful indictments of imperial power and some of his most nuanced writing, while also presenting their own challenges. *Dust on the Paw* and *The Holy Tree* (1969), with their multiplicity of perspectives, including those of central characters native to the country described, present the richest exploration of such conflicts. In *Dust on the Paw* much of the novel offers the point of view of Abdul Wahab, impoverished science schoolteacher who met the resilient Laura Johnstone while studying in Manchester and is bringing her to his country to experience it before they are married. The novel sees this interracial relationship through a series of different eyes – some sympathetic, some hostile. The imminent arrival of 'Miss Johnstone' throws the expatriate community into turmoil, forcing those who have their own 'mixed' marriages to reassess the dynamics. Harold Moffatt, lecturer in English at the local university, is forced to confront the abyss between his own supposedly liberal views and the inner tensions of own marriage to Lan, who is Chinese: 'by gibing so bitterly against racial prejudice, Moffatt more than helped to keep it in existence, he also kept himself infected with it'. (p. 33) Contextualising these small-scale conflicts is the larger awareness that the country may be on the verge of abolishing the

shaddry, the all-enveloping robes worn by Nuranian women. As Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir has argued, the operation of power through hierarchies of gender and ethnicity represent the novel's most challenging discourses. Ágústsdóttir reads Jenkins' texts as asserting that association of feminist and postcolonial thinking which emphasises parallels between them: both 'seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant' and understand the relationship between Empire and patriarchy in terms of 'double colonisation' for women.¹⁵ Certainly the plot structure of *Dust on the Paw*, in which both Wahab and Laura simultaneously occupy positions of victim and rebel, would appear to reinforce such a structural reading. Its narrative fluidity however, shifting from one character's interiority to another's, complicates such an interpretation.

The Holy Tree also challenges obvious interpretation. It takes as its focalizer Michael Eking, another young man with educational and social aspirations to move far beyond the position normally allocated to his race. Through a series of morally ambiguous actions and the misadventure of circumstance, Eking is propelled into controversial public success. As with Wahab, but to an even greater extent, the reader both sees his viewpoint and is distanced from it. While Eking can be understood as excluded from education by the dominant culture, its ethnic hierarchies and economic restrictions, his own perspective on race and gender is not presented in sympathetic terms: 'Though her body had excited him he was not pleased by the public impudence of the woman towards her husband. When the whites were gone, or rather when they gave up control of the country, care would have to be taken that such follies as the equality of women were not allowed to corrupt Kalimantan's way of life.' (p. 20) While such a perspective may reinforce awareness of the double oppression of women and depict attitudes produced by the processes of inferiorisation, it also challenges

the reader by preventing any simple notion of victimhood.

In both novels Jenkins is drawn to the creation of characters that embody aspiration and naivety and who, through their assimilation of dominant values while occupying positions of exclusion, become both foolish and inspirational, emblematic of the conflicting investments of western and national powers at work in their countries. Such characters are very familiar from other novels by Jenkins: from Calum in the early *The Cone-Gatherers* (1955) through Mungo Niven in *A Very Scotch Affair* (1968) and Gavin Hamilton in *A Would-be Saint* (1978) the idea of the 'holy fool' is key to Jenkins' challenge to glib moralities and social hypocrisies. Eking and Wahab are also endowed with the complexity of these other characters. Reading these novels in the context of postcolonial theory however this 'holy fool' construction can cause be a certain unease: while the 'subaltern' is allowed to speak, making the subaltern occupy that role of innocent comes curiously close to an infantilising which stresses 'the primitive' or childlike quality of the local people, characterised by Said as a key element within Orientalist definitions.¹⁶ The correlation between dominant perceptions of 'innocent' natives and these central characters can make them appear more representative, less of a challenge to conventional modes of thought, than similar figure in a Scottish context. The uncomfortable reading positions offered by such characterisation is further complicated in those instances where Jenkins adds his own sardonic emphasis. As with the leading character in the short story 'Siddiq', where we have to situate ourselves in relation to descriptions of 'His fluency in English, his handsome appearance, his knowledge of the city and its nefarious ways, and his flair for original and undetectable dishonesty' (p. 96), the characterisations of Wahab and Eking prove challenging.

The second problematic issue for readers approaching Jenkins through the frame of postcolonial or feminist theory is the role of gender in his fiction. Jenkins is acutely aware that he is dealing not just with clashes of cultures but with cultural determinants of the body: skin and blood. As a result miscegenation becomes the focus for the most uncomfortable confrontations with the tensions of ethnicity. Yet this also means that much of the focus is upon, rather than from, the perspective of female sexuality. The moment in *Dust on the Paw* when the shaddry is removed is triumphant but also celebratory of dominant and exoticising images of female sexuality which now read as rather less than liberating. When the Minister of Justice's wife removes the silk veils covering her, British official Alan Wint is dismayed by feelings excited and by the comparison with his own wife:

She was an excitingly beautiful, exquisitely groomed, superbly dignified woman [...] Paula – and he thanked God for it – was domestic in comparison: she was home to him, as a lush green field with cows in it was home; her loveliness was as English as buttercups or honeysuckle. Mrs Habbibullah, on the other hand, was remote and predatory; but he would not, for the rest of his life, forget her as he now saw her [...] smiling and representing not only the dignity and courage, but also the mystery and menace of her sex.' (p.383)

The case can be made (as Ágústsdóttir does) that Jenkins demonstrates how 'women share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of the oppressors.'¹⁷ In defence of Jenkins she employs Kanneh (1995) who argues that the 'feminising of colonized territory is a trope in colonial thought.'¹⁸

Certainly to focus, as Jenkins does at various points, on the idea and fear of miscegenation, goes to the heart of any critique of colonialism and he is highly alert to the body itself. In *The Holy Tree* we find 'dour and bony Scot', John Melrose, the Chief of Police musing on how a friend had recognized that Melrose's mistress: 'Monica had a beautiful body, one of the very few rice-coloured to compare with the slim golden ones of the young Chinese

women'. (p.104) By depicting the perspective of one of the colonisers in this way Jenkins demonstrate the intertwining of biology, ethnicity, sexuality and aesthetics in the perceptions of the colonial oppressors and the resultant production of difference. Such distinctions are, in turn, adopted by colonial subjects. So Eking, fascinated with the red lipsticks and breasts of Mrs Reynolds, is dismissive of another teacher: 'an Indian, wearing a green sari, and with the black glossy hair in a thick plait down past her waist. She too has big breasts but they would be as dark as her face, and he had seen enough dark breasts before.' (p. 63) This obsession with bodily difference is played out in relation to Eking himself: the eyes of others and his own are frequently drawn to the (potentially) syphilitic sores on his leg and the troubling tightness of his shorts, which embody a characteristically orientalist perception of manhood. By highlighting the importance of bodily markers in sexualizing otherness and othering sexuality Jenkins' novels begin to suggest the kind of critique that is articulated by later theorists such as Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather*.¹⁹ He also demonstrates – in fiction such as *Leila* and 'Imelda and the Miserly Scot' - the ways in which non-white female bodies 'were associated with primitiveness, savagery and sexual deviancy, inviting to 'both sexual and colonial conquest'.²⁰

What makes such readings of Jenkins rather problematic, in terms of a more explicitly feminist critique, is that Jenkins goes to some lengths to present white women as either sexually over-exuberant and therefore repulsive – as in *The Expatriates* with the image of Flo Bennett attracting mosquitoes 'with her fat arms and legs naked, and most of her chest, made a succulent pasture for them, if that was, they did not balk at sweat scented with gin, huge varicose veins, drenched hairy armpits, and at least four chins' (p.122) - or 'unnaturally repressed' and again repulsive. Margaret Ormiston in *The Expatriates* repels her husband on

the first night of their marriage: 'He could not disguise his astonishment and dismay at the immaturity of what she was offering. Her breasts were only slight swellings on her chest; he had to look twice to see any nipples [...] Very soon he found himself not so much making love as establishing her as a woman, to her own satisfaction anyway [...] Once that was done, at her snarled but loving behests, he was allowed to find what pleasure he could in impregnating her. He did not find much.' (p. 65) Likewise in *Dust on the Paw* the 'brazen bitch', Helga Larsen, is contrasted with Wahab's fiancée, seen from his point of view after their first love making: 'When, afterwards, he turned his head to look first at her naked but parsimonious breasts, and then further up her face twisted unrecognisably, he could not help considering the excellent reasons for not marrying her.' (p. 294) Such passages could, of course, be read as Jenkins' interrogating dominant models of both Western and Eastern sexuality, their interactions and the associated body images. However, the absence of alternative models of positive female sexuality – from any of the women whatever their background – in his novels makes this a difficult argument to sustain. If Western women are seen to embody cultural deformity in terms of their sexuality, the more 'natural' sexual appeal of women in the East produces in itself a familiar and mystificatory racial stereotype. *Leila* presents a late but key example of this problematic. While the novel is critical of the views of the expatriate community which 'exoticises' Leila, the novel itself establishes a comparison between her and Sandiland's Scottish lover, Jean Hislop, who is both sexually explicit or 'coarse' as the narrative describes her but also repressed: 'though she would parade naked in front of him she nevertheless had a curious shyness in relation to sex. She tried to disguise it with obscene words and gestures.' (p. 52). This kind of language appears to reinforce a very familiar opposition. The novel both sets up and interrogates Leila as a

metonym of the colonized other and directly discussing her as territory: 'Sex was no simple soul. In her there were many intrepid discoveries too be made. It might take a more intrepid explorer than he.' (p. 37). By presenting such a viewpoint as coming from Sandiland's consciousness creates further ambiguities and he struggles with his own ambivalences:

She seemed to be carrying herself with exaggerated elegance, as if to emphasise how untouchable she was. He was being made to look rude and unworthy. Was that her intention? Did she suspect, for give away signs that he had not himself been aware of, that she ad an instinctive or instilled prejudice against coloured skins and was challenging him. No, that was absurd.' (p. 95)

Yet while this delineation of conflicting emotions and dissection of prejudice is a nuanced one, there is no counter to it in the novel. Leila is viewed from the point of view of Andrew, or the expatriate community: she is given no interiority herself, which almost inevitably reinforces the construction of her as exotic cipher.

Such a construction could, however, be seen as a knowing one. A similar dynamic is evident in 'Imelda and the Miserly Scot', a short story about Andrew McAndrick, a mean-spirited Scot who negotiates and exploits the 'worth' of his 'native' mistress, in which those passages that might seem to reinforce racial and feminized stereotypes are contextualized by the understanding that they articulate the views of certain groups. So when Imelda is first represented the language appears to reinforce both racial and gender stereotypes: 'All the most entrancing qualities of Asian women were assembled in her: the carriage of an Indian, the dignity of a Chinese, the golden colour of a Filipino with Spanish, and the sweet mouth of a Dusun, though not the thick lips.' (p. 29) These lines are, however, are preceded by a sentence which suggests this might be the view of McAndrick's male friends:

'McAndrick's sari'd companion was passing close enough for them to get a good look at her,

and none of them had ever seen a more beautiful woman.' Furthermore, Jenkins' narrator perhaps comes closest to acknowledging the central issue of the 'subaltern' by stating 'What Imelda herself thought of all the comments on her appearance on the course no one every knew, for no one ever asked her; and she never offered opinions.' (p. 50) Both novel and short story illustrate the structures of feminisation in colonial thinking - thus arguably acknowledging Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's point that 'if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in its shadow'.²¹ Indeed both *Leila* and the short story struggle to find a specific narrative alternative, resorting instead to the 'speech' of violence. In the case of Imelda, this is the murder of her husband with a native, witnessed by his female servant - 'showing her black stumps of teeth in a horror that had, he noticed, with his last flicker of intelligence, savage triumph in it.' (p.64); in that of Leila a decision to sacrifice herself in bloody revolution. As Spivak later argued of women in certain colonial contexts: 'in attempting to make her body speak, even unto death' becomes 'a way of bringing subalternity to crisis.'²²

Through his fiction Jenkins is interested in challenging the limits of human understanding, and in questioning – without dismissing- the possibility of empathy; this is most obviously true of his postcolonial writing. In this context his sense that in order to convey such social and moral complexities conventions of the realist novel itself might have to be challenged is also evident. There is a revealing moment in *Leila* where there is an uncharacteristically metafictional acknowledgement of literary tradition. Teaching his students literature Sandiland is puzzled by their responses to Jane Austen: 'they had baffled him by not finding Mr Collins the figure of fun that Jane Austen had intended. On the contrary, all of the,

Malays and Chinese, males and females, had made it clear they sympathized with the pompous parson [...] This was how a prudent man would act. [...] For them meek Mr Collins was really the hero of the novel, not the haughty D'Arcy.' (p. 15). By alerting his readership to a different interpretation of the conventions of romantic fiction and the moral values of the English social comedy, Jenkins also highlights and draws into question dominant paradigms of the English novel form in terms of its capacity to delineate fully the challenging play of positions produced by imperialism and postcolonialism.

Jenkins continued to find his experiences working in other countries a fruitful source for his fiction. *A Far Cry from Bowmore* (1973) includes stories from both Afghanistan and North Borneo; from this collection 'Bonny Chung' and 'Imelda and the Miserly Scot' have been singled out for critical attention.²³ He drew on his time spent in Spain, as in *The Sardana Dancers* (1964) and in that country too noted similarities between the Scots and Catalans.²⁴ But his experiences abroad also fed into his writing about home: 'I would need as wide a perspective as possible if I was to go home and see Scotland truthfully.'²⁵ This is significant not only in terms of his deepening understanding of Scotland's colonial past or of an individual's positioning within clashing cultures and value systems. Rather in his 'postcolonial' fiction he was forced to engage with young countries and cultures forging – or attempting to forge – their own political destinies, challenging the histories that had been written for them by western powers. His increasingly sophisticated political awareness and analytic awareness of national identities, the aspirations and confusions created by mixed cultural messages – as explored in 'Bonny Chung' – is brought back to a Scottish setting in novels such as *A Very Scotch Affair* (1968), *Fergus Lamont* (1979) and *The Awakening of George Darroch* (1985). Marina McKay, for example, argues that '*Fergus Lamont* is about the

problems of how a national history can be told and passed on without the numerous forms of falsification and wishful thinking that tempt its literary hero'.²⁶ If, as he complained in 1983, 'Scotland is now a small nation which is only too willing to recognise its smallness and cringe submissively', his experiences in Afghanistan and Malaysia encouraged Jenkins to find a voice and means of dissecting and questioning that sense of restriction.²⁷

Increasingly, of course, Scotland has turned to other 'small nations' to understand its own place in the dynamics of colonialism. The extent to which parallels can be traced between Scotland and colonised countries is much debated. Ágústsdóttir suggests that Berthold Schoene, who was one of the first critics to apply postcolonial perspectives to the Scottish context, 'fails to acknowledge that the role of the Scots themselves in the imperial mission complicates things considerably, despite the seeming parallels between Scotland and the colonies. According to Richard Finlay, the Scots 'prided themselves on being a race of empire builders' in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and for them, the British Empire 'was as much a Scottish creation as an English one'.²⁸ Moreover, as Stefanie Lehner argues: 'not only does any claim for Scottish postcoloniality, which designates the country as an English colony, remain highly contentious [...], but postcolonial criticism within a Scottish context is almost inevitably prone to prioritising issues of nationhood and nationalism over other important categorical concerns of individual and communal identity such as class and gender.'²⁹ In the same critical vein Liam Connell has suggested: 'The designation of Scotland as an English colony is highly controversial and displays a dazzling confusion of textual and social forms of exclusion.'³⁰ Connell focuses in particular on the confusion of colonisation and imperialism, conflating political and economic agendas. Jenkins' fiction can

be read as an embodiment of such debates. While scornful of literary theory himself, his fiction plays out the challenges to paradigms and contextualisation which these critics argue over. Jenkins was not someone who embraced literary theory: he would, however, have relished the lively debates over postcolonial contexts and Scotland's place within them. As if in anticipation of such controversy his fiction set outside Scotland forces its readers into uncomfortable confrontations with cultural difference and refuses reconciliation or resolution.

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² Robin Jenkins, *Dust on the Paw* (London: Macdonald & Co., 1961).

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p.40.

⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 20.

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- ⁶ Robin Jenkins, *Some Kind of Grace* (London: Macdonald & Co., 1960; Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004).
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- ⁸ Gardiner, *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature*, p. 5.
- ⁹ Robin Jenkins, 'Siddiq', *A Far Cry From Bowmore* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973), 95-133, p. 99.
- ¹⁰ Robin Jenkins, *The Tiger of Gold* (London: Macdonald & Co., 1962).
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- ¹⁴ Robin Jenkins, *Leila* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1995).
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- ¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism* p. 39. For the 'subaltern' see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', from L. Grossberg and C. Nelson (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), in Rosalind C. Morris *Reflections on the History of an Idea: Can the Subaltern Speak?* (New York: Columbia U.P. 2010), 237-91.
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- ²¹ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak' in Rosalind C. Morris *Reflections on the History of an Idea?*, p.257.
- ²² Spivak, 'In Response: Looking Back, Looking Forward', in Morris, *Reflections on the History of an Idea?*, 227-236, p. 229.
- ²³ See Ágústsdóttir; Sellin.
- ²⁴ 'When I was in Spain I saw some links between the Scots and the Catalans, but they were much more fervent.' Glenda Norquay, personal interview, PhD thesis, 'Moral Absolutism in the Novels of Robert Louis Stevenson, Robin Jenkins and Moral Spark' (University of Edinburgh, 1985) p. 438.
- ²⁵ Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir, PhD thesis, 'Pilgrims of Conscience: Quests for Morality and Self-Knowledge in the Fiction of Robin Jenkins (University of Glasgow, 2001), quoting from Robin Jenkins, 'Why I decided Scotland must be seen through fresh and truthful eyes', *Glasgow Herald* 12 October 1982: 11, p. 119.

²⁶ Marina Mackay, 'Rewriting and the Politics of Inheritance in Robin Jenkins and Jean Rhys', in Gardiner (eds), *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature*, 158-69, p. 168.

²⁷ Glenda Norquay, personal interview, PhD thesis, 'Moral Absolutism in the Novels of Robert Louis Stevenson, Robin Jenkins and Moral Spark', p. 437.

²⁸ Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir, PhD thesis, 'Pilgrims of Conscience: p. 122.

²⁹ Stefanie Lehner, 'Subaltern Scotland: Devolution and Postcoloniality', in B. Schoene (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 292-300, p. 292.

³⁰ Liam Connell, 'Modes of Marginality: Scottish Literature and the Uses of Postcolonial Theory', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, XXIII: No. 1 (2003), 3-18, p. 4.