

Full Length Research

Balladic Fantasy as Symbolic Scottish Otherness in Elspeth Barker's and Jessie Kesson's Novels

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Elspeth Barker's *O Caledonia* (1991) and in Jessie Kesson's *The White Bird Passes* (1958), (in particular Barker's *O Caledonia* set in the 1940s and 1950s, during and post World War II, and Kesson's *The White Bird Passes* set in the 1920s, post-World War I) rhetorically fuse north-eastern Scottish landscape with balladic fantasy. Given that the north-eastern milieu provides particular elements for the literary expression of its Otherness (its political, religious and economic difference from Lowland Scotland, particularly on the way to industrialisation after the World Wars), we must look more carefully into whether or not this literary representation of a local historical account attempts to challenge the dominant forces at work in a particular society. I discuss the historical backgrounds in Barker's *O Caledonia* and Kesson's *The White Bird Passes*, which structurally display the subjugated position of the female in post-war rural communities, backgrounds wherein the industrial centralisation of labour predominates, but wherein both authors rhetorically emphasise the female characters' internal rejection of their subjugated position and their interaction with wild nature. Balladic fantasy, as a literary tool that counters the social inequalities, involves a creative complex in regenerating social force. I contend that in the two novels, the representation of landscape in north-eastern Scotland aligns with the female protagonists' identification with lost maternal love, where the presentation of the north-eastern landscape provokes discussion about the imprisonment of gender and sheds light on the psychological resistance to, and transgression of, gender reality.

Keywords: ballad, fantasy, gender, maternal, otherness

INTRODUCTION

I choose Barker's *O Caledonia* (1991) and Kesson's *The White Bird Passes* (1958) to illustrate the north-eastern Scottish woman's struggle between her desire for an idyllic life and her concerns about the restrictions imposed upon her by civilised society—particularly as those restrictions charged during the post-war periods after two world wars.

Scottish landscape, especially the northern rural regions, has been used to represent national and cultural identity since the time of Sir Walter Scott. Though this literary origin may stem from Scott's romanticisation of the Highlands in the early nineteenth century, the romanticising of landscape continues to provide fictional motifs for twentieth century novels. While Scott validates national and cultural identity in visual descriptions that function 'within a paradigm of fact and realism'¹, some twentieth-century female novelists do not make use of landscape description for recording the 'reality' of Scottish rural life. Instead, they employ visual description as a medium for psychological projection. Due to the fact that the perception of reality is subjective, if not documentary, and that cultural differences 'exist in relation to tensions between town and country, between cities (e.g. Glasgow and Edinburgh), between rural Highlands and Lowlands, between fishing and farming communities'²,

some twentieth-century Scottish female writers have personally inscribed imaginary spaces through the documentation of cultural differences in Scottish rural life.

What deserves our attention are the multiple ruralities³ expressed by writers in different places, and how those ruralities correspond to regional identities. If these multiple regional identities, as Tomás Monterrey indicates, show a novelist's 'distinctive [vision] of the complex reality of the Scottish territorial macrocosm in their fictional microcosms'⁴, we may then ask about the ambiguous role which the landscape of the north-eastern Scotland plays in twentieth-century Scottish novels: do these fictional 'microcosms' *deviate from* this 'macrocosm' as an alternative narrative icon? Or, does this territorial 'macrocosm' *marginalise* some of the 'microcosms' as minorities? In an effort to answer this question, I shall first evaluate the contentious realm of contemporary criticism as it concerns the role of landscape in modern Scottish novels.

My intention in this paper is to discuss the contention that the image of otherness is somehow associated with the north-eastern Scottish landscape, and to show how Barker and Kesson challenge this notion of the North-east as an Otherness. Both authors link the negative reaction towards subdued virginity with a similar repulsion for the violating forces of civilisation in the north-eastern Scottish landscape. This landscape's wilderness epitomises the maternal idyll and also its unfettered potential power.

First of all, I would like to point out the problems

¹ Nash suggests that Scott's literary 'representation of a local community as a documentary account of real life in Scotland' 'held the power to validate a national identity'. He argues that 'the way Scott's works were represented within visual terms' forms the national identity of Scotland, particularly to the non-Scottish readers. Nash, Andrew. 'Understanding the Land in Scot(t)land'. *Terranglian Territories*. Ed. Susanne Hagemann. (Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 2000), pp. 631-640 (633-634).

² McClure, Derrick, and Merrett, Robert James. 'What is Region and Nation? A Forum'. *Terranglian Territories*. Ed. Susanne Hagemann. (Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 2000),

pp. 649-665 (653).

³ I use this word to mean the diverse local cultures, especially those of the rural areas.

⁴ Monterrey, Tomás. 'Gendered Territories in 20th-C Scottish Fiction'. *Space & Place: The Geographies of Literature*. Eds. Glenda Norquay and Gerry Smyth. (Liverpool: Liverpool John Moores University Press, 1997). pp. 297-306 (298).

and risks that inhere in some critical viewpoints that hold the north-eastern landscape to be an Otherness in Scottish writings. By drawing upon Kristeva's idea of the abjection of virginity in light of her interpretation of the Virgin Mary's role as intercessor between the Son Christ and Father God, I will use this notion of the ideal virgin (one which deeply influences gender relationship in western culture) to examine the female position in both novels as one characterised by the subjugated notion of the ideal virgin. Furthermore, I will show that Barker's and Kesson's novels attempt to separate out the wilderness of nature (as particularly embodied in the female protagonists) from the symbolic order which threatens the female protagonists' wild and fantastic universe. I will concentrate on how these fictions articulate the violation that is produced by a civilisation that is dominated by patriarchal power, and that is encroaching upon the nature's heritage of north-eastern Scotland. This paper ultimately examines the way that a moral and spiritual necessity for liberation is concomitant with the call for rural wilderness.

The central argument of this paper draws upon a shared novelistic response to postmodern indeterminacy: beneath the overt reproach of the violation caused by the various forces of patriarchal institutions, there exists a rebellious reaction. The heroines' abjection of the socially subjugated notion of the ideal virgin causes their own bewildered identification with the image of lost maternity⁵: this is

⁵Kristeva's idea of abjection suggests that 'the *fully* symbolic body must bear no indication of its debt to nature, and that the image of woman's body, because of its maternal functions, acknowledges its debt to nature and consequently is more likely to signify the abject'. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. p. 102. However, this abjection of maternal function which has been socially repressed produces the search of the lost maternity. See Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva: unraveling the double-bind*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana

symbolised by the natural power of north-eastern Scotland.

I. *Interrogating the North-East's Otherness*

Through her analysis of contemporary Scottish novels, Anna Paterson regards the portrayal of Scotland's landscape as a stereotypical wilderness. She argues that it is this very perception of Scottish landscape by Scotland's people that gives it its national identity.⁶ She suggests that Scotland's landscape, particularly its northern less populated rural settings, functions as a symbol of Otherness in the literature of the Lowlands of Scotland, as well as in the literatures of other countries in terms of regional literary coloration. The icon of the northern Scottish landscape, in Paterson's view, remains as a regional and national identity. We can be certain of her view that the regional wilderness, especially the north of Scotland, has become a symbol of national identity through the wilderness as it often appears in the public media. Her contention, however, that this wilderness becomes a literary Otherness to the literatures both of the Lowlands and of other countries, needs to be questioned and re-evaluated. The interiorisation of the landscape in modern Scottish novels generates a sense of belonging; however, it does not follow that literary features of a local community can be marked as a regional or national Otherness to what is outside this sense of belonging.

If a local sense of belonging accounts for the

University Press, 1993), p. 53.

⁶ Paterson argues that the role of the landscape in the iconology of Scotland illustrates the divide between reality and patriotic invention. The reality is the cityscape (unstructured fringes of housing and industrial estates) but wilderness becomes identified with nationhood and patriotic invention in literature. Paterson, Anna. *Scotland's Landscape: Endangered Icon*. (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2002), p. 34.

otherness of a region, we may say that this Otherness can be based on regional uniqueness in the realm of historical development, but not on the political division between subjectivity and its Otherness. While analysing some Scottish novelists who elaborate the nature of north-eastern Scotland, David Hewitt points out the uniqueness of the North-east's Otherness. He indicates that the language employed in some Scottish novels about the nature of the North-east not only marks the otherness of this region but also provides a connection between the adult present and the youthful past.⁷ From Hewitt's perspective, the North-east's Otherness obviously binds itself with time, with the discrepancy between the inclinations of different ages. Nevertheless, Hewitt ostensibly ignores the fact that this discrepancy, although characteristic of a local culture at a particular place and time, results from more than one of the local communities' economic and political conditions. The dynamic interaction between financial and political conditions in different communities leads to various discrepancies between superior and inferior developments in different regions. What the literary configuration of these discrepancies concerns, through the depiction of landscape, is Scotland's social condition as a whole and the nation's imbalance of regional powers.

This national concern is fully revealed through the insecure social conditions in these two novels. The two writers make north-eastern communities into distinct segregated societies, showing their 'Otherness' in opposition to industrial invasion by the Lowland Scotland. This Otherness relies on the inferior development of north-eastern Scotland as compared to

southern industrial development at some critical, historic moments. Barker and Kesson both depict this Otherness as a result of industrial exploitation and regional withdrawal, examining the North-east's interaction with the invading forces of civilisation that are coming from the Lowland Scotland (specifically with regard to economic, political and religious conditions after two World Wars). They depict the invading and oppressive power of politics, finance and religion through the configuration of fictional characters who symbolise certain political and religious ideas at specific post-war periods. The two writers invalidate this Otherness by inscribing it onto the landscape in response to the external power's abuse and self-exile. Their regional identities in these myth-makings connote special psychological elements.

If ruralism maintains regional traditions, then the role of landscape in Barker's *O Caledonia* and Kesson's *The White Bird Passes* represents the *metamorphosis* of the female protagonists from a naïve child into a melancholic beauty. The treatments of north-eastern landscape involves gender issues in both these novels. This dimension warrants an attention to the contentious issue about how the landscape contributes to the figuration of fictional characters, and how it serves to maintain a regional identity. Anderson and Christianson, in the introduction of *Journeys Into Being*, point out the significance of diverse traditions as they are preserved in contemporary Scottish women's writing. They indicate that:

By pluralizing the 'journey' in our title, we hope to suggest the variety and range of experiences that these women writers explore: the spiritual dimensions as well as the material, the social and historical as well as the metaphysical . . . We do not see

⁷ Hewitt, David. 'The North-east: Literature and Identity'. *Northern Visions: Essays on the Literary Identity of Northern Scotland in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. David Hewitt. (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1995), pp. 190-209 (205).

these writers as coming out of any one single and unified 'Scottish tradition'.⁸

Their introduction suggests that critics might give a limited reading with universal significance. When examining the issues that Scottish women faced in an earlier, stringently patriarchal Scotland, we cannot ignore the role of the past, particularly the role of past cultural circumstances in the construction of womanhood in twentieth-century Scottish communities. Anderson suggests that the approach to the material makes a strong case for understanding any culture's struggle to escape patriarchy.⁹ The construction of womanhood in Scottish communities of the twentieth century, those which are affected by various forms of material culture (from the economic to the natural), significantly highlights the north-eastern Scottish motif and its embodiment in female figures.

We may infer here that generalising the role of Scotland's landscape as an Otherness in Scottish writings seems to exclude economically marginalised cultures in Scottish writings. This economically inferior Otherness cannot be identified with literary Otherness. In 'Peripheries', Cairns Craig describes the way in which F. R. Leavis absorbs elements of peripheral cultures—in the works of Joseph Conrad and Henry James, for example—in order to establish a unified and apparently homogeneous model of 'English' literature.¹⁰ The critical criterion adopted by Leavis in *The Great Tradition* favours fixed moral standards and resolution, reinforcing the notion of totality, rather than challenging it. Catherine Belsey also comments on Leavis's literary

strategy, arguing that the dominant culture, by absorbing the standards of peripheral cultures, produces a set of criteria to sustain a hierarchy of subjectivity and consequently to retain its power:

Trained in the kind of discrimination demonstrated in The Great Tradition, the leaders of the community are to be properly equipped to recognise a hierarchy of subjectivity, mysteriously given to individuals, and judged on the basis of a knowledge not open to rational argument. By this means, a ruling elite provides itself with a sensibility which is the source and guarantee of its right to control and administer experience.¹¹

Belsey implies that a set of criteria, uncensored by 'rational argument' and passed down from leaders of the community to individuals, too readily maintain a communal imagination. We may again say that the traditional concept of a community cannot sufficiently emerge as a standardising literary mode. In *The Modern Scottish Novel*, Cairns Craig points out recent shifts in various perspectives on national identities, literary history and language varieties, some of which reverse traditional judgments on Scottish fiction.¹² He suggests that these shifts, rather than being concurrent with recognised traditions, do not champion ideal communities but seriously reflect a society broken and divided in religion, values and language.¹³ It is these cultural differences rather than cultural minorities that

⁸ Anderson, Carol and Christianson, Aileen. 'Introduction'. *Scottish Women's Fiction, 1920s to 1960s: Journeys Into Being*. (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000), pp. 7-19 (8 & 10).
⁹ *Ibid.*, Anderson adopts a materialist feminist approach in the analysis of Scottish womanhood in an essay 'Feminine Space, Feminine Sentence: Rebecca West's *The Judge*', pp. 32-44.

¹⁰ Craig, Cairns. 'Peripheries'. *Cenrastus*. 9 (Summer 1882): 3-9.

¹¹ Belsey, Catherine. 'Re-reading the great tradition'. *Re-Reading English*. Ed. Peter Widdowson. (London: Routledge, 1982), pp. 121-135 (129).

¹² Craig claims that modern Scottish novels are apt to 'define some of the distinctive elements that constitute a tradition and examine how this tradition has gone into the maintenance of a specifically national imagination'. Craig, Cairns. *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 9-36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

constitute various forms of local literary Otherness.

Barker and Kesson both demonstrate the distinctive qualities of the north-eastern Scottish situation in their own terms, and reveal an evaluation of what may be valuable in it. Their fictional undertones, which criticise conventional literary modes, echo Craig's call for reassessment in the conclusion of 'Peripheries': Recognising the vitality of the periphery is the first step towards overthrowing the dominant conceptions of tradition; overthrowing those traditions will release the vitality of the periphery.¹⁴

If projecting one's identity onto wild natural settings can be regarded as a method of peripheral thinking (as a way of creating a dream world far from the real world), then the intention of overthrowing social traditions can be seen as the underlying condition of many divided selves in Scottish fiction. These divided selves long to escape their claustrophobic communities and to be released in liberating values: paradoxically, they need communal loyalties in order to wrestle with contending moral and communal value systems. This version of Scottish anxiety suggests a conceptual dislocation from how they assume their worlds operate. We may assume that it is these melancholy perceptions and patriotic inventions of the north-eastern Scottish landscape that contribute to the figuration of a marginalised self in an exploited but forsaken rurality.

II. *Jettisoning Subjugated Virginity*

After examining the role of north-eastern Scottish landscape as a literary icon of Otherness, we must continue to investigate how the abjection of marginalised landscape connects with the repulsion of the socially prescribed value of the ideal virgin in the

symbolic order and how the search for maternal love links with the wilderness of landscape. According to Kristeva, the cult of the Virgin stems from the medieval Orthodox Christian view of the Virgin Mary, who acted as intermediary between a mortal sacred Christ and the omnipotent God. The Virgin Mary is modeled upon the role of intercessor, 'content to pass from life to death via the intermediary of the "Dormition"', 'at the cost of a "pilgrimage of the Mother of God amid the torments"'.¹⁵ Sanctification of her suffering and sorrow suggests her virtue and immortality, and therefore *excuses* her boundless immersion in suffering. Kristeva regards Mary as embodying 'signs of an extraordinary predisposition to masochism'.¹⁶ In other words, Kristeva asks what is subtle in the social and psychological functions of the cult of the Virgin, while this edifice represses the modern woman's experience of virginity. This is what Kristeva calls the problem of 'feminine paranoia'.¹⁷ For Kristeva, this religious cult of the Virgin Mary is overt in its attempts to define what it is in the feminine. This leads women to write in a form that challenges phallogocentrism.

Through her account of her own childbirth in 'Stabat Mater', Kristeva says: Let a body venture at last out of its shelter, take a chance with meaning under a veil of words. WORD FLESH. From one to the other, eternally, broken up visions, metaphors of the invisible.¹⁸ Kristeva claims that the corporeal mother with her *jouissance*, her 'sexual-intellectual-physical

¹⁴ Craig, Cairns. 'Peripheries'. *Cenrastus*. 9 (Summer 1882): 3-9. p. 9.

¹⁵ Clément, Catherine and Kristeva, Julia. *The Feminine and the Sacred*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. European Perspectives. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 73.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁷ Commented by Toril Moi on Kristeva's 'Stabat Mater'. Kristeva, Julia. *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. Trans. Léon S. Roudiez. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1986), p. 160.

¹⁸ Kristeva, Julia. 'Stabat Mater'. *The Portable Kristeva*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. Updated edition. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 310-333 (311).

passion, of death' replaces the Mother-God.¹⁹ Transcendence into the semiotic realm symbolises a search for the lost maternal love that *precedes* the entrance into the symbolic order. While the right column depicts the religious discourse of the Virgin, the left column elaborates what is left out of the symbolic discourse. Kristeva indicates in an interview with Rosalind Coward that 'with the two columns and the two kinds of typeface she wanted to give the impression of a scar or wound'.²⁰ Kelly Oliver particularly comments on the scar, writing that the semiotic maternal is castrated as any discourse on maternity.²¹ Oliver claims that childbirth necessarily means losing the child, since the mother identifies with the castration of a mother who has lost her own mother, and searches for the bitter reunion through childbirth.²² This painful but sweet encounter and identification with the maternal semiotic transcends the realm of the maternal symbolic (oppressed female body).

Kristeva herself indicates that this 'feminine paranoia' is primarily narcissism:

We live in a civilisation where the
Consecrated(religious or secular)
representation of femininity is absorbed by
motherhood. This motherhood. . . involves
less an idealised archaic mother than the
idealization of the relationship that binds us
to her, one that cannot be localized—an

¹⁹ In reference to Kristeva's 'Stabat Mater' in *Tales of Love* (1976), pp. 262-263. Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva: unraveling the double-bind*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 53.

²⁰ In reference to Kristeva's conversation with Rosalind Coward. 'Julia Kristeva in Conversation with Rosalind Coward'. *Desire, ICA Documents*, 22-27. p. 24. Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva: unraveling the double-bind*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 53.

²¹ Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva: unraveling the double-bind*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 53.

²² *Ibid.*

idealisation of primary narcissism.²³

A woman's rejection of the ideal of virginity in search of the identification with the feminine 'before the beginning' (in Kristeva's view, in this sense, virginity itself)²⁴ comes to no avail, as no available symbolic code can guarantee this radical 'transcendence'. Only when 'the relationship with Mary and from Mary is revealed as the prototype of love relationships', can women find justification in declaring Mary to be the Mother of the divine institution on earth, the Church.²⁵ However, Kristeva continues that even when this love is filled with justification, it forms nothing more than a guardian for 'two fundamental aspects of Western love: courtly love and child love, thus fitting the entire range that goes from sublimation to asceticism and masochism'.²⁶ We may say that the sublimation of a woman's suffering under asceticism and masochism improperly justifies the over-praised value of the physical and psychological sacrifice of virginity in a society where a woman's position is subservient to the status of a second sex.

Since the female love is subjugated to either a plane of gender passion or to a plane of generative function, the feminine power is degraded to a secondary position, both in the family and in the city due to the female body. Barker and Kesson write their central figures as characters who defy the social principles of the ideal virgin as prescribed for the

²³ Kristeva, Julia. 'Stabat Mater'. *The Portable Kristeva*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. Updated edition. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 310-333 (310).

²⁴ Clément, Catherine and Kristeva, Julia. *The Feminine and the Sacred*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. European Perspectives. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 73.

²⁵ Kristeva, Julia. 'Stabat Mater'. *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. Trans. Léon S. Roudiez. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1986), pp. 160-186 (164 -165).

²⁶ Kristeva, Julia. 'Stabat Mater'. *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. Trans. Léon S. Roudiez. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1986), pp. 160-186 (165).

female body. Their female protagonists struggle to break the bonds of fearful communities in order to achieve spiritual emancipation. Barker and Kesson intriguingly elaborate woman's bewildered existence by linking her encounter with the socially subdued value of virginity and her psychological projection of abjection into the landscape. Their novels demonstrate a deep concern for the modern loss of communal awareness regarding maternal virtues, virtues such as inspiration and imagination. Their female protagonists mourn over social disrespect towards violation of the female body, while desiring to discover its survival in an enduring sense of a marginalised but wild landscape.

These female protagonists tend to yearn for natural and non-rational powers, suggesting that a woman's social position is not properly esteemed and that any sexual abuse can never be fairly redeemed. This literary tendency echoes Craig's view that Scotland needs both its devils and its lost monsters as part of its soul, along with the wild region that is part of its pre-rational identity.²⁷ Craig's view implies that there has always been a formidable spirit in Scottish nationality; even though this nationality is routinely embodied as an innocent child in literature, Scottish dignity cannot be subdued. Scotland's potentially demonic powers may usefully counteract the injustices that attempt to violate its nature. From this perspective, we may say that the north-eastern Scottish landscape, with its pre-rational wilderness and demonic reaction, becomes a symbol of innocence and naïveté for regional identity and spiritual liberation.

David Hewitt also points out the formation of

²⁷ While discussing MacDiarmid's and the Renaissance's central recognition in *A Drunk Man* and elsewhere, Craig shows this view in his evaluation of the writers' vision as a dark view of the human condition. Craig, Cairns. *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 22.

regional identity as subjective, exclusive but independent:

'identity' is a protean concept; while the word seems to imply something knowable and definable, its content is legion: the natural environment of a region, its communal, popular and cultural history, its modes of winning and living, its material, religious and political culture, together with a sense of being in opposition to another culture which will often be perceived as politically and economically more powerful.²⁸

'Another culture' with 'politically and economically more powerful' contingencies is associated with patriarchal authority in Barker's and Kesson's fiction. Their female protagonists jettison their socially subjugated position and reject the culturally suppressed values of virginity, engaging instead in wild imaginings and the spontaneous flow of joy with nature. In order to oppose the repression of the symbolic law that is characterised by male-dominated institutions, these heroines consciously dismiss such authority and unconsciously identify with nature's nurturing (though ever wild and sometimes threatening) powers. They consciously deny the virginal attributes and unconsciously yearn for the greater natural power to redress what cannot be substantially defined as 'Otherness'. North-eastern Scotland, fertile (but exploited) and abundant in natural dark forces, becomes a venture of radical transcendence²⁹ over the symbolic order of femininity

²⁸ Hewitt, David. 'The North-East: Literature and Identity'. *Northern Visions: Essays on the Literary Identity of Northern Scotland in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. David Hewitt. (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1995), pp. 190-209 (190).

²⁹ Indicated by Kristeva to Clément in a letter: 'before time, before the subject, before the beginning', 'nonplace before the beginning has been designated feminine or maternal'. She understands the feminine as 'something completely different

(in Kristeva's view, virginity itself). Barker's and Kesson's central characters are prone to identify something as being the true feminine, which is completely different from a symmetrical role of the symbolic order.

The improperly over-praised value of ideal virginity, according to Kristeva, becomes the 'polluting value' and draws out the borders of the body within the sexual difference.³⁰ What deserves our attention is that this socially polluting value also generates psychological pollution. In Kristeva's view, woman is specifically related to two categories of pollution: excremental and menstrual. Excrement threatens the identity from the outside while menstrual blood represents the danger from within.³¹ For Kristeva, these two defilements 'stem from the *maternal* and/or the feminine' and are 'a primal mapping of the body' that 'illustrate the boundary between semiotic authority and symbolic law'.³² The excremental defilement is evidenced through the fictional heroines' worlds of *symbolic law* that represses woman's creative power. Their psychological distancing from more dominant ideals produces menstrual pollution which ironically shows their self-inflicted marginalisation—their intentional mapping of a link between their oppressed body and nature.

In other words, the authors' female protagonists identify themselves with natural wild power in order to counter-balance the power of *symbolic authority* as it is embodied in patriarchal institutions. In these two novels, this is not told us by a narrative voice but is presented instead through the narrative itself. We may discern this

fearful self in the female protagonists' pre-mature stage of girlhood and in its effects on their perception of gender roles once they reach the stage of womanhood. The literary imagination and natural partiality that pervades their girlhood become variants of the abjection of social gender roles.

Although menstrual pollution signifies the heroines' poignant protest against external authority over the female body, it retains the exuberant vitality of a sensuous wilderness. Kristeva stresses the ambivalence of menstrual pollution as the abject: on the one hand, it indicates 'the impure' while on the other hand, it 'also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation'.³³ It is 'where *death* and *femininity*, *murder* and *procreation*, *cessation of life* and *vitality* all come together'.³⁴ This vitality remains differentiated from the system of worldly values (in these two novels, the institutional authorities of patriarchy) and remains linked with the motors of natural vigour (the heroines' energetic inspiration from nature and literature). The phenomena that Barker and Kesson recognised in the Scottish North-east after two World Wars, is gradual depopulation. They write of an enormous reduction in the scope of human activity such that the distance between the maternal, as symbolised by the secluded and naïve North-east, becomes obviously separated from the secular in civilisation, and is epitomised by the cruelty and blood-lust of patriarchy. This reveals the two novelists' conscious intent to deal with a society whose scale of values is out of proportion with their own demands.

from a symmetrical double of the masculine'. Clément, Catherine and Kristeva, Julia. *The Feminine and the Sacred*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. European Perspectives. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 73.

³⁰Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. Trans. Leon Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 71.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 71-73.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁴*Ibid.*

III. *Defilement of the Maternal / Virginal Joy*

Barker and Kesson both interrogate a literary mode that marks the North-east's 'Otherness', binding its differentiators together and providing a revised interpretation of the relationship between the human condition and regional, rural identity. As concerns the historical specifics of particular periods, these two writers generate myths in order to oppose the tendencies of two post-World Wars (for Barker, the 1940s and 1950s; for Kesson, the 1920s) and to invite their readers to probe the human condition and its link with north-eastern Scottish landscape.

Elsbeth Barker considers the religious oppression of the female body in *O Caledonia*. The fact that Barker's *O Caledonia* obtains its title from the opening of Canto VI, Verse 2, of Scott's narrative poem *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*—'O Caledonia! Stern and wild, / Meet nurse for a poetic child!³⁵—foregrounds an ironic but poignant mimicry of a 'poetic child' abused by Caledonia, that place of no 'meet nurse'. Barker's *O Caledonia* portrays Janet's childhood and adolescence at her family's stern and forbidding home in north-eastern Scotland in the years after World War Two. This novel laments religious rigidity within economic and gendered hierarchies of class during post-war life, but at the same time, celebrates the beauty of place. The disparate scenes between the culture's rigidity and the landscape's poetic climate reinforce the central protagonist's sentiment of natural celebration.

Calvinism, a religious force that at one time permeated every level of Scottish life, lays out the

repressive nature of its social practice. Fionn MacColla describes Calvinism as unnatural, disruptive and reductive, always denying individual fulfillment by preaching the absolutist Judgment of the next world.³⁶ In a world governed by a God who demands moral absolutes, humanity must be continually aware of Original Sin because salvation has only been predetermined for the Elect; this salvation, however, remains a matter of uncertainty to those who pray for their sins. In discussing the ethical representation of Calvinism in Scottish novels, Glenda Norquay also indicates that an individual's lack of hope leads him/her towards a dangerous disregard for the quality of deeds and action.³⁷ Calvinism's metaphysical implications (a sense of uncertainty in a world of flawed existence and irreconcilable fatality for humankind) produces, as Norquay observes, Scottish anxieties that challenge moral realism in Scottish fictions.³⁸ If this Scottish anxiety results partly from the oppressive nature of Calvinist theology on predestination, then gender anxiety, as a constant social issue, must inevitably fall prey to Calvinism's social dominance.

In Calvinist culture, the female body plays an 'object' role. Jennie Rubio suggests:

for Knox, the body is a metaphor both for the evils invading society as well as the sin invading the spiritual self. In his religious and political writings, the female body often becomes a symbol of horror, the site of the sin which destabilises spiritual identity.

Arguing that because women represent the

³⁵ Anderson, Carol. 'Emma Tennant, Elspeth Barker, Alice Thompson: Gothic Revisited'. *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 117-130 (124).

³⁶ MacColla, Fionn. *At the Sign of the Clenched Fist*. Ed. John Herdmam. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), pp. 180-182.

³⁷ Norquay, Glenda. *Moral Absolutism in the Novels of Robert Louis Stevenson, Robin Jenkins and Muriel Spark*. Ph.D. Thesis. University of Edinburgh, 1985. p. 35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

body they should be banished from political power which requires considerable 'male' rationality.³⁹

In Calvinist society, 'the site of sin' is apparently equated with the female body as an excuse for male sexual menace and male 'rational' domination of femininity. On the danger of filth, Kristeva stresses that the power of pollution is 'not an inherent one' but 'it is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it'.⁴⁰ We may say that man's fear of the female body as a sinful object derives from the religious discrimination imposed upon the female body, that the prohibition of spiritual liberation breeds pollution.

In *O Caledonia*, Barker situates the setting first in Edinburgh and then in the Highlands: Janet is born into 'the unrelenting chill of a Calvinist world' (6) where she learns about God's 'watchful and punitive presence' (8). She soon becomes preoccupied with the knowledge of original sin and predestination,⁴¹ imagining herself as being punished for what is the unknown. First, she is punished by being forced to become 'a big girl' (9); later she is sacrificed at the 'altar of womanhood' (130). She lives in a household run by a 'grim insistence on self-control and cleanliness' (16) and she goes to the church where the minister addresses 'the wrath of God':

Be ye ashamed . . . for ye were born in sin'.
Forgiveness there might be in the next
world, but not in this, and there would be the
day of Judgment . . . The damned sat bleakly
upright on the hard bare pews, unflinchingly
accepting his verdicts. (32-33)

The landscape, as if responding to the harshness of retribution, is figured by the 'unforgiving sea' (16) to be heaps of pillows 'staring unforgivingly' from windows (11). The repeated image of the eye suggests many 'watchful, punitive presences': from the minister's reminding his parishioners that 'ye'll no pull the wool over God's eyes' (33), to the cat 'glaring . . . with unflinching malevolence' (20). Later, when Janet's family moves to Auchnasaugh, a castle in the Highlands, they encounter a landscape of begrudging history near to where an ancient Scottish King was murdered, 'transfixed' with a spear thrown in vengeance (34). Young Janet imagines God as 'clad in a butcher's striped apron' (8) and her society responds to her premature death with calloused prejudice—'The lass had only herself to blame' (3).

The abject is particularly important in religious discourse. Kristeva argues that by following Christ, pollution and sin become located *within* the speaking subject, rather than without.⁴² The female body, as an image of the punishment for sin, demonstrates the protest of 'pollution' when inflicted by patriarchal society upon female madness. Janet's role model, Lila, her family's resident madwoman in the attic (63), induces Janet to imagine herself as being her school's 'madcap of the Fourth' (64), who is considered mad simply for her intellect (72). Janet's mother Vera, however, expects her daughter to be transformed into a secular and more traditionally accepted girl (120). She encour-

³⁹ Rubio, Jennie. "'Escaping her Carapace": Calvinism and the Body in Alice Munro and Elspeth Barker'. *Scotlands*. 2.1 (1995): 74-87. p. 77.

⁴⁰ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. Trans. Leon Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 69.

⁴¹ Rubio summarises the fundamental beliefs of Calvinism although it is not an easy theology: 'it emphasises both humanity's fallen nature following its disobedience in Eden, as well its damnation for its sins. But although wrathful, the Calvinist God is also merciful and just, and has pre-selected certain people for salvation, a selection that is both undeserved and arbitrary. Human knowledge of it is forever uncertain because, with the fall, humanity also lost its ability to apprehend God's will.' Rubio, Jennie. "'Escaping her Carapace": Calvinism and the Body in Alice Munro and Elspeth Barker'. *Scotlands*. 2.1 (1995): 74-87. p. 75.

⁴² Lechte, John. *Julia Kristeva*. (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 165.

ages this by taking Janet to a hairdresser's salon. The salon reminds Janet of the lunatic asylum to which Cousin Lila is assigned because its 'neon-lit inner torture chamber of throbbing machines' (130) seems like a place for the crucifixion of women, or 'the dim, blood-boultered altar of womanhood' (130). Menstrual pollution influences Janet from childhood to womanhood and ominously foreshadows Janet's murder at the age of sixteen.

The bitterness of Calvinist culture not only marks the living attitudes of Janet's community elders', but also highlights the treatment of her peers. Depicted from the start as a victim of religious culture, Janet is taunted by the boys (59) and defends herself from the sexually rampant Raymond Dibdin (68). Janet wants to imagine the family house as romantic and dignified, but discovers a hidden cache of pornography. The visiting boy catches her in the act of perusing it in disgust and gets excited, '[b]randishing and waving a dreadful dark pink baton' at her 'out of the front of his shorts' (68), and trying to kiss her. Even Janet's companion, her spirit-like pet jackdaw, tries to lure her into her pocket to mate (145). By imaging herself as nature's elect, or as a form of spiritual predestination, Janet is vulnerable to a fear of 'bodily' predestination (36). This explains why when she enters womanhood at the age of sixteen, she play-acts a black-garbed 'femininity', feeling 'strong and bright and beautiful' (150). Her violent and Gothic demise is thus foreshadowed.

For Kristeva, the feminine remains 'synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed'.⁴³ We may note that what is to be suppressed is exactly that which waits to rampage. Although Janet desires to lead a life of intellectual spirituality, none of the cultural scripts are compatible with her life and she has 'no way [to express]

her state in words, no way of escaping her carapace' (108). Barker explores the Calvinist implication that the abject body is an inescapable prison that the spirit cannot escape and makes the body vulnerable to the physical world. Janet is stabbed by the pornography-gathering gardener, Jim, with his rabbit-skinning knife, and is found 'oddly attired in her mother's black lace evening dress, twisted and slumped in bloody, murderous death' (1). Like a Calvinist minister, Jim had 'come in to turn off the music and the lights' (152) and slyly made Janet into one of his 'slaughtered innocents' (37). Jim's hissed words—'You filthy wee whore' (152)—suggest the misogyny and ruthlessness of a life-denying Calvinist culture.

The possibility of converting an era's culture relies, perhaps, on the remembrance of past lessons. Janet's parrot-keeping family evokes the dangers contained in the oblivion of the past. Janet's grandfather's belief that 'ancient parrots should be fêted . . . as true archivists' implies the danger of allowing the history of female victimisation to repeat itself uncriticised, and warns women that their destiny through violence is madness and death. This is evidenced through Janet's and Lila's fictional ends. The mad, Russian-born Lila is effectually erased as 'all her past was gone' (42), and Janet's death 'was to be forgotten' (2). Although Janet is convinced that 'forgetting [is] the only possible way of forgiving' (87), her belief recalls a new start after the oblivion of the inhuman part of her past. As at the end of the novel, her spirit is borne away by the 'wild winds of dawn' (152); the dawn wind promises the possibility of rebirth: the wind 'brought the next day, and whirled the past off into the breaking clouds: a wind thrilling and melancholy, tender and cruel, a wind of beginning and ending' (109). As Christianson suggests, Janet's upper-middle-class family might be seen as a 'case

⁴³Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. Trans. Leon Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 70.

study of eccentric sub-aristocracy',⁴⁴ and this eccentric sub-aristocracy in *O Caledonia* seems nurtured by the Calvinist inscription of the female body. In my opinion, this Calvinist domination over the female body derives from a distrust of human self-discipline, particularly as practiced by women. Calvinist restrictions here also show the lack of human love for the individual self and others, as well as the deficiencies of human confidence when it comes to individual autonomy and personal destiny. Through *O Caledonia*, Barker has re-writes the historical construction of the body, suggesting that the female body has its own predestination free from patriarchal religion and aggressive warfare.

As there are multiple regional identities, so are there multiple ruralities expressed by people in different places. In some ways that are similar to *O Caledonia*, Kesson's *The White Bird Passes* shows how a young girl's innocent pleasure in childhood is mistreated by social disrespect towards the female body. Kesson indicates in her journal titled 'My Scotland' that there were two growing places for her: maternal joy and female sensibility: 'Both of these small areas of Scotland moulded me, laid claim on me, as I do on them, Morayshire . . . the heart. Aberdeenshire . . . the mind'.⁴⁵ The Elgin slum of Morayshire renders a hearty joyfulness to the Young Janie while the Skene orphanage of Aberdeenshire bestows upon her the bitter enlightenment of adult sexuality. Like Barker in *O Caledonia*, Kesson explores the boundaries that construct social and sexual identity, by mapping out the different worlds Janie inhabits at her childhood and in

her womanhood respectively.

Janie's illegitimate birth begins with her mother Liza's unconventional sex life as an amateur 'old-fangled' whore (*The White Birds Passes*, 16). Without a father, Janie lacks a sound family with a mother 'in rare, enchanting moods' (65). The rare communication between Janie and her mother make the young girl identify a few other mother-like characters, all of whom provide definition for Janie's emerging identity; her relationship to them, however, leads to tragedy within their patriarchal community. The first mother-like character to suffer tragedy in Janie's Lane is Mysie Walsh. She is the only prostitute in the street apart from Liza, and is a warm exciting figure to Janie. It is not the suicide of Mysie Walsh, her mother's warmer and more extroverted companion, which makes Janie concerned for her mother. Rather, it is

Liza's reaction to Mysie's suicide and funeral, when Liza states enviously that, 'Mysie Walsh's in the best place' (36), which makes Janie concerned that her mother may crave death. The treatment of time here is a deliberate device used to depict Janie's life in the Lady's Lane over an abbreviated seven days: from chapter one, where a depressed Mysie sends Janie for cheese, through the discovery of Mysie's corpse that evening and her funeral, and finally to the brief but futile escape of Liza and Janie to the Diddle Diddle (the boarding house accommodating the socially 'marginalised' but peculiar persons) a week later. Mysie Walsh's death, symbolising the sacrifice of female sexuality as a scapegoat for patriarchy, becomes a fictional turning point, because her tragedy foreshadows the young Janie's entrance into sexuality as she leaves the Lane.

Although the slum Lane accommodates poverty-stricken, variously crippled and drunken characters, it is seen as 'home and wonderful' (86) by

⁴⁴ Christianson, Aileen. 'Elspeth Barker, Candia McWilliam and Muriel Spark, Writers in Exile'. *Terranglian Territories: Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on the Literature of Region and Nation*. Ed. Susanne Hagemann. (Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 2000), pp. 339-347 (340).

⁴⁵ Kesson, Jessie. 'My Scotland'. *The Scottish Review*. 35 (1984): 39-41. p. 41.

Janie. Annie Frigg suffuses a world with imagination and promises Janie exotic presents that never materialise. The ballad lovers, such as Poll Pyke, Battleaxe, and the Duchess, seem lively, encouraging words of magic for Janie. This accounts for Janie's love for the tinker, Beulah, who along with the other tinkers had 'the magical facility of rolling far-sounding places round their tongues' (46). Another crucial mother-like figure is Janie's grandmother. Kesson makes it clear that though Janie's grandfather never came to terms with her illegitimacy, refusing even to speak to her, her grandmother was a supportive figure for the young Kesson and her mother.⁴⁶ In another autobiographical short story, Kesson recalls becoming jealous of her cousin's expensive, bright shoes, and hearing her grandmother's enlightening words: 'Sorrow be on shoes. The lark needs no shoes to climb to heaven'.⁴⁷ In *The White Bird Passes*, Janie's grandmother always welcomes Janie's visit, while her grandfather's 'clock gasping the seconds over and past' (119). These mother-like figures contribute to our understanding of Janie's vulnerable position on the edge of a constrained social structure.

Kesson proposes a key word to describe these suppressed and unfitting characters in their living circumstances:

Nor had she [Janie] outgrown her affinity with what Grandmother would have called 'Ne'er do weels,' the Lane 'Riff Raff', and Skeyne 'Ootlins'. Skeyne's word was the best word. The most accurately descriptive. Ootlins. Queer folk who were 'oot' and who, perversely enough, never had any desire to be 'in'. (118)

The Aberdeenshire word 'ootlin' best characterises those people who are cast into the world in which they 'don't fit'.⁴⁸ These alternative mothers, like Janie, cannot be 'fleshed' into their strictly demarcated world, but neither can they escape from the universe into which they are cast. Situated behind the High Street, the Lane epitomises the social order. The image of an intractable human body has been foregrounded through a depiction of the confining male characters and the insubordinate Lady's Lane.

When mill workers come clattering up the Lane, its 'Ladies' are readily dispossessed:

The Duchess and her coterie diminished on Thursday night, leaning against the causeway with silent disapproval while the Lane's up-and-coming race held the cobbles and, even more galling, held them in an idiom to her Grace; flaunting overmuch of that tin jewellery from woolworth's, that new store, Nothing Over Sixpence, that had just opened in High Street . . . (16)

These newcomers' live in a world of labour and consumption, earning money in the mill, spending it in stores, and drawing divisions between work and pleasure. By invading the Lane, these newcomers displace the pleasure of the lane from Lady's Lane itself, and replace it with the pleasures of economic activity (the pleasure of earning and spending). It remains a scene of spoiling previous spontaneous human delight. Later, when leaving Morayshire for Aberdeenshire (moving from a populous city slum to a less populous agricultural village), Janie still cannot escape the world

⁴⁶ Murray, Isobel. *Jessie Kesson: Writing Her Life*. (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000), p. 29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38. A story of Kesson's *Where the Apple Ripens*.

⁴⁸ Kesson also indicates the meaning of the word in an interview with Murray and Tait. See 'The Sma' Perfect: Jessie Kesson'. *Scottish Writers Talking*. Ed. Isobel Murray. (Edinburgh: Tuckwell Press, 1996), pp. 55-83 (58).

of labour where economic pleasure triumphs over human delight. Janie's home at the orphanage is still graded by tasks, and the children are ranked according to the governors' pleasure: the youngest newcomer has to sweep leaves in the yard, and then moves up to cleaning boots. Janie, at the end of the novel, obtains the pleasant job of delivering milk. These institutions deprive women of their maternal joy while controlling the relationship between work and pleasure. At the end of the novel, we are shown Janie's body awakening under its own exposure to the glances and desires of the men around her—the ultimate distinction between (female) identity of gender and (male) pleasure of desire.

IV. *Landscaping Abjection*

These two novels exemplify striking interactions between female Scottish characters with their surroundings, including both rural settings and distinctive cultures. The two literary works achieve an ironic undertone through the tragic resolution of difficult themes: Janet's death in *O Caledonia* and Janie's melancholic lament as an 'ootlin' (or social outsider) in *The White Bird Passes*. Both works outline a retrogressive journey through which the female fantasy of romantic love conceals a desire to escape from patriarchal society. In neither case, however, can the woman prevent herself from ending up the victim of patriarchal society. This ironic undertone is hard-won and usually involves suffering: it is not the outcome that either protagonist desires, but is instead a resolution that promises readers a new and enriched understanding of the female protagonist's mental state. This facility for resolution reflects the fact that these two twentieth-century novelists define themselves in terms of their position as women (a larger and more inclusive

category than nationality), and that they devote themselves to finding psychological reality and to *overcoming* the problems they face in a society that seems in many ways to discriminate against women.

V. *Mourning the Desolation of Landscape*

The landscape in *O Caledonia* appears romantic but savage, and forms an opposition to the artificiality of human cultivation:

Winter descended on the glen; in
mid-October came the first thin fall of
snow, gone an hour later in the wet wind.
The deer ventured down from the hills at
dusk, tawny owls shrieked as they hunted
through the darkness and shooting stars
fled across the night sky.

(*O Caledonia*, 52)

Barker mocks this scene, with its animals howling in the dark winter night as a grim but obligatory repression of a bleakly unforgiving Calvinist culture. *Caledonia* evokes 'Sunday afternoon tea in the cold parlours of outlying crofts, where the Bible was open beside a ticking clock and rock buns were assembled on snowy doilies, malignly aglitter with the menace of carbonised currants' (3). The clock's regular ticking and the rock buns' presumed position on the white doilies both symbolise the orderliness of a regimented life which regulates the routines of getting up at the same time everyday and of going to church every Sunday. This orderliness stands opposed to the wild outdoors and to the passion of the feminine. The demonic animal howling prevails on the snowy white land, and in the windy night epitomises an imprisoned spirit's desire for emancipation. The terrifying power from the demonic animals lurking in the white landscape outside corresponds to the vengeful power from the sensitive

adolescent sitting in the religion's rigidly repressing tea room inside. It is worthy to note that a significant contribution to the effect of abjection as made by Kristeva, is her call to be attentive to the abject or demonic potential of the feminine, a potential which the symbolic is unable to completely repress though it should seek its co-existence.⁴⁹ In other words, the co-existence of the demonic potential *and* the feminine is required when the subject confronts what has been suppressed. While Janie identifies her power for revenge with the potentially subverting force of the demonic animals outside the house, the landscape atmosphere invigorates the 'lonely figures driven by passion and savagery' (47).

While the name of Janet's home, 'Auchnasaugh', means 'the field of sighing' (32), Janet's Nanny, who personifies the Calvinist culture, sucks 'a vengeful Pandrop' (7) with her hat spiked with hatpins (8). Unlike her Nanny, Janet, drawn to the 'gaunt place' Auchnasaugh with its moaning winds (32), its 'dim and vaulting hall' and its 'Gothic arch' (1), favours the 'holy splendour of all the purples' (9) and decorates her bedroom with 'lengths of purple taffeta which she would nail to her walls as a start to redesigning the room in the manner of Edgar Allan Poe' (136). The Gothic atmosphere increases although Janet's adopted jackdaw, Claws, who is installed in a doll's house, fails to repeat 'Never more' (136) like Poe's Raven, and instead learns from her brother Francis to say 'Never mind' (145). The extremities represented by those universes experienced by Janet and her nanny deepen the gap between freedom and restriction in the symbolic order of Calvinist society.

Through an overt reframing of the Gothic, *O Caledonia* criticises the literary mode of Gothic that

aims to reveal the psychic truth of threatened or violated objects. Barker's concern with patriarchal power structures and with the instability of female identity invites a mixed response by readers to Janet's death. Readers may react through feminist voices with a 'great tide of anger' (69), as Janet does to Raymond's sexual assault: 'How dared he . . . All her dreams and yearnings for high romance . . . pitted against his miserable filthy mind' (69). However, the novel evokes a deeper concern for the female victim's rejection of her socially subjugated gender role and isolation from her community. Janet, desiring in childhood to be either a princess (11) or Snow White (17), and intending in any event to be different from her female peers, seems too individualistic as she isolates and distinguishes herself from others. Barker employs the third-person narrative with shifting perspectives in order to alert her readers to keep their distance. Janet mistakenly believes that 'she [can] control her destiny' because 'the gods whom [she] had chosen played tricks on mortals for their pleasure' (135). Barker ironically asks readers, using Janet's tone: should we feel 'pity like a naked newborn babe' (108)? The answer remains unsettling as Janet's tragedy and Barker's playful, shifting tones, mix together throughout the novel.

Jennie Rubio proposes a relationship between the abject self and the landscape, commenting: 'The abject self—what the subject represses for its identity—is often projected on to the landscape, which can then take on a dangerous, demonic energy'.⁵⁰ In *O Caledonia*, Janet rejects a Calvinism that mortifies the notion of self. She thinks of the story of Lorna Doone's father who was killed by riding intrepidly over a cliff:

There seemed no place for gallantry or

⁴⁹ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. Trans. Leon Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 63.

⁵⁰ Rubio, Jennie. "'Escaping her Carapace": Calvinism and the Body in Alice Munro and Elspeth Barker'. *Scotlands*. 2.1 (1995): 74-87, p. 78.

romance among Calvinists. They would say that he should have looked where he was going. Clearly he had not been one of the Elect who were distinguished by perseverance or grim stoicism, and were offered secret divine assistance. (90)

Identifying herself with this dauntless riding, Janet constructs her self-image based on the denial of the body. Hers is a drive towards a spiritual dimension based on energetic but demonic power. She escapes the destiny of an ideal virgin by yearning for a demonic, powerful passion. Her rejection of the female body, however, does not substantially block out her self's imagined Other (her socially subjugated body). Learning about sexuality, for instance, Janet is appalled:

What a disgrace. It was lucky that she had never had any intention of having babies; now she would certainly never marry either. She would live out her days at Auchnasaugh . . . until that time when she might become ethereal, pure spirit untainted by the woes of the flesh . . . (59-60)

Even literary reading cannot ensure Janet's identity because reading penetrates both her physical and psychological boundaries: reading Tiresias's 'description of fat floating in the blood of sacrificial beasts' causes her 'to vomit hugely across the room' (126). Janet's literary distraction makes her unconsciously reject the movement into womanhood.

Besides writing the distortion of female mentality as induced by Calvinist culture, Barker also invites mixed responses to Caledonia. Withholding absolute judgment, Barker incorporates an ironic tone into her portrayal of a history-haunted region, with an allusion to ancient violence and to the Scottish play, *Macbeth* (61). The novel is over-shadowed by World War Two and presents an anti-war motif that features physically and

mentally damaged exiles. Vera is the most obviously satirised character by Barker: her headscarf is 'printed with the flags of the allied nations', bearing 'the slogan "Into Battle" many times repeated' (53). In sharp contrast to Vera's worldly sophistication, Janet's knowledge of the Holocaust and the destruction caused by the atomic bomb (107) suffuses her perception of her world with animal suffering: 'Anger rose in her and merged with her grief, confusing her utterly. She had had enough, she could not cope' (109). Depression is also evidenced through the suicide-like act of Janet's pet jackdaw and through her family's dying cockatoo: the jackdaw killed himself 'like a tiny kamikaze pilot' (2) and the cockatoo's hovered 'like the paraclete' (80). All of these suggest a psychological resistance to a religious tradition, to an exhausting family, and to a blind nation at a certain age.

Images of the body recur throughout the novel, haunting Janet with sexuality. To Janet's distress, her own body cannot be contained while her sister, Flora, seems 'self-contained' (27). Janet vomits in cars, loses parts of her clothes, and her hair grows 'wider and frizzier, escaping from its pigtails, tangling in everything it touched' (27). She refuses to speak of the body (the narrative discussion of the body in the novel are in the third-person), and she seeks to defend her subject boundaries. She constantly recognises symbols of her sexual obliteration. She learns to ignore the sea, for instance, against which people 'lost their identity, were no more than pebbles, part of the sea's scheme' (88). The sea here symbolises both a loss of self as well as Calvinist predestination. She recalls how four students drowned after stealing a boat: the minister reminded them of the 'words of Knox': 'the same justice remaineth in God' to punish 'thee, Scotland, and thee, Edinburgh' that punished 'the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem' (89). While remarking on the ambiguity of

abjection, Kristeva suggests the following:

Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelms me, I lose my composure, I feel "lost", "indistinct", "hazy".⁵¹

What is jettisoned, therefore, is precisely what appears to disturb the alienating subject. A recurring word in the novel can affirm the phenomena of Janet's abjection of her own female body. The novel begins with the description of a stained glass window at Auchnasaugh, and therein depicts a bird whose breast is 'transfixed' by an arrow (1). The word 'transfixed' with the meaning of 'piercing through' conceals the contradiction in Janet's fighting and desiring. She is fearful of breaking her bodily boundaries, either sexually or spiritually, and fixes her self-image in nature and in any literary scripts extolling it. However, her transfixion does not liberate her imprisonment, but instead turns as an ending to her fate. Acknowledging human impotence after she has accidentally 'transfixed' a toad on a pitchfork, Janet conceives that there is no pity in the world: 'A bleeding heart could only bleed and bleed. It seemed to her then that the nature of Caledonia was a pitiless nature and her own was no better' (109). Janet's death is a literal transfixion that blows her finally dis-integrated spirit 'far north of love or grief' (152) and that shakes her subject boundary.

VI. Projecting Fantasies into Landscape

The maternal relationship is as problematic for Janie in *The White Bird Passes* as it is for Janet in *O Caledonia*. Although the female protagonists in both

novels try to repel the social restrictions placed upon women, they are quite different in their method of secluding themselves from symbolic fetters. While Janet in *O Caledonia* spontaneously laments the desolation of landscape, Janie in *The White Bird Passes* searches for lost maternal love by projecting fantasies onto the landscape.

Lost maternal love is the most activating motor to drive Janie's fantasies and melancholy. Liza is figured as enigmatic and less reliable in her moods and fancies than any other women in the *Lady's Lane*. Janie's sense of maternal love is often insecure. Janie's memory of Liza is of fragments:

If Janie had been suddenly stricken with blindness she would have had a perpetual picture of her Mother in her memory. Not a photograph. Her mother had so many faces. But a hundred little images. Each of which was some part of her Mother. And her Mother some part of each.

(*The White Bird Passes*, 22)

Because her illegitimate child has been born into a respectable rural family, Liza has been cast out of her family. This remains an area of tension for young Janie because Liza makes a living for them by exploiting her sexuality. Her sense of insecurity makes Janie desire a protective figure like her friend Gertie's father. She therefore creates a dead father out of her imagination: 'Gertie didn't know what it was to sneak the door and hide under the bed when they came. Her Dad was there to attack the attacker, shouting right down the Lane after him . . .' (39). She longs for a strong father who not only loves the tin whistle but who also possesses power. She fantasises that the school Headmaster reveals himself to be her father and surprises the rest of her imagined class. In Kesson's literary world, however, there exists, even on a personal level, no such figure to play this role; all Janie

⁵¹Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves*. Trans. Leon Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 187.

encounters are men of authority—the Cruelty Man, the Sanitary Man and the Free Boot Man. Together, these male figures dominate the Lane and form a ruling world over the human community in which Scottish songs and tales vibrate.

When an ill Liza comes to the Orphanage to try and free Janie to care for her, she does not present herself attractively. Janie cannot find any words to tell her mother that she loves her, but leaves the reader in no doubt using vivid memories tinged with imagination:

All the things I know, she taught me, God.
The good things, I mean. She could make
the cherry trees bloom above Dean's Ford,
even when it was winter. Hidden birds
betrayed their names the instant she heard
their song. She gave the nameless little
rivers high hill sources and deep sea

endings. She put a singing deal in Loch Na
Boune and a lament on the long, lonely
winds. She saw a legend in the canna
flowers and a plough amongst the stars.
And the times in the Lane never really
mattered, because of the good times away
from it. And I would myself be blind now, if
she had never lent me her eyes. (129)

Norquay suggests that 'in order to make a passage into the symbolic order and into a world which obeys conventional gender roles, there must exist a recognition of patriarchal power'.⁵² Nevertheless, this recognition is never fully fulfilled in *The White Bird Passes*. Janie resists institutional patriarchy in the form of imagination occupies until the time she meets 'the Mannie', who helps run the orphanage. Recalling that

Mannie 'hovered on the fringe of Orphanage life' (134), Janie obtains her musical experience: Mannie tries to teach Janie that she might find it 'easier to work your thinking in with your other jobbies' (137). Nevertheless, even this important figure of male mildness, a figure associated with both nature and with outdoor activities, plays little part in directing her future apart from alerting her to adult sexuality. From the slum Lane to the orphanage Skene, Janie's awareness of different worlds, each one carrying its own set of hierarchal structures and its own peculiarities, makes Janie remain resistant to patriarchal authority.

Situated economically and socially on the edges of society, Janie is more at ease in the world than her mother, although her rich imagination conceals an attempt to remain separated from authority. It is the marginality of Beulah's world of the Green where fairs, travellers, and tinkers deviate from the authority of social order, which Janie longs to be part of it:

The Green had its own social scale. Lord John Sanger's circus was the cream of its aristocracy. When the circus arrived, the chair-o-planes, the Strong Man, the coconut stalls, withdrew from the center of the Green and huddled themselves away in a more remote direction, like young sons knowing their proper place but still dependent. When winter came and the last circus elephant had trumpeted its way to the station, and the show's last caravan rumbled along the North Road, leaving only faded, brown circles on the Green's grass to prove that they had ever been there at all, the tinkers, the third and last grade of the Green's society, took over.

(45-46)

This world of shifting hierarchies provides the confusion of categories and the blurring of boundaries.

⁵²Norquay, Glenda. 'Borderlines: Jessie Kesson's *The White Bird Passes*'. *Scottish Women's Fiction, 1920s to 1960s: Journeys into Being*. Eds. Carol Anderson and Aileen Christianson. (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000), pp. 122-133 (125).

It is Beulah, a tinker who lives on the Green, whom Janie identifies as a role model. Beulah's poaching, her trading of rags, and her memory of past markets and fairs open up a peripheral but highly inspiring world which stands opposed to the Lane's institutional world. Although she has never been beyond the Lane through her own imagination, Janie, in her close companionship with Beulah, finally imagines herself to be a real tinker someday, a real outsider to the institutional order.

Norquay suggests that the novel's narrative strategy 'works through a series of juxtaposed peripheral worlds whose hierarchies both imitate and undermine the authority of social order'.⁵³ Kesson skillfully uses the recognition of conventional elements to subvert conventional roles. Here they encounter a man with no legs but with a 'great, black hairy grin' (101); Blind Jimmy is a singer [but 'a bit too free with his hands the moment he gets within an inch of a woman' (103)] and a poacher and a fortune teller. The combination of bodily distortion, sexuality, and law-breaking frightens her mother back into the 'shelter' of authority, while—in quite an opposite manner—it revitalises Janie's imagination.

Isobel Murray writes about the success of *The White Bird Passes*, commenting:

the literary tact which encourages the reader to sense and share feelings that are not spelled out, and to be aware always of emotional depths that are the more powerful for being unplumbed.⁵⁴

What has not been spelled out in the novel is attributed to the emotional disturbance of Janie's abjection of maternal space and female body. By making the central

character's journey towards the central social order, Kesson does not present a conventional *bildungsroman*, but instead illustrates an 'outlin' when Janie is diagnosed with a disintegration of personality by the people in orphanage. We may note Janie's divisions, for example, when Mrs. Thane points to the contradictions she finds in Janie and explains them to the Trustees:

She's a puzzle. She can be crude and knowing as they come. And, at the same time, she's less sophisticated and more sensitive than any of other children, who haven't had such a deplorable background.

(149)

Her constrained circumstances, as both a child and a girl, alert the readers to another dimension of the narrative—the half self-made border line between the different worlds of men and nature.

Conclusion

Barker's and Kesson's central female characters dream themselves into other worlds because they are dissatisfied with their own; their dreaming, however, is only one aspect of the central problem that both novelists confront. Their society offers them no human activity that will supply spontaneous joy and creativity. In such a society, the child who possesses imagination finds little to feed on. Without sustenance, their imagination becomes wild; otherwise, by rejecting imagination, they will die. These heroines use their imaginations and identify themselves with the dark but vital power of the landscape in order to escape from, or to ignore, uncongenial reality. Because they can conceive of a different world intensely, they can live more comfortably in the imagined world than in the real one.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁵⁴ Murray, Isobel. 'Jessie Kesson'. *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*. Eds. Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 481-493 (487).

Their works operate as an analysis of Scotland's self-perception and psychological conditioning at a level that does not succumb to mere documentation of the twentieth-century urban world. Their portrayals of human nature are sufficiently divorced from the centre of urban life so as to become 'microcosms' of the country as a whole, miniatures of a human condition that is not defined by the contingent actualities of Scotland's 'civilised' condition. The demonic force of feminine aspiration and desire stands opposed to the subjugated function of the female body as a reproductive medium in the symbolic (patriarchal) world. In this respect, north-eastern Scotland serves to represent the Scottish wilderness and its marginalised relationship to civilisation, signifying both the ambivalence of marginality—its vibrancy and tenacity—as well as its limits and problems.

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