

## The Gendered Literary Landscapes of Elizabeth Jolley

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I define a landscape after Fredric Jameson as the consequences and projected after-image of a structure of production and appropriation, of what I maintain has been the gendered social organization of productivity (*Postmodernism* 387). The American geographers, Mary Ellen Mazey and David Lee, have examined human culture in our landscapes, and they comment:

[i]ooking at the totality of the cultural landscape, one is impressed with the rich variety of human-created forms which are found on the land. Many of these objects are unrelated to gender; the list of those which are related to women is surprisingly small considering that women are more than half the population. Agriculture, industry, and urban design are dominated by men, and the landscapes associated with these activities owe their overall composition to the decisions made by men. One can only wonder how the landscape might appear in an egalitarian society. (*Her Space, Her Place* 71)

Our constructed landscapes are male-dominated in the sense that they are shaped by the decisions of the dominant gender. Nearly all of the fictions of Elizabeth Jolley are set in either developed rural or suburban environments which have been formed by men's decisions and designs. Furthermore, Jolley's literary landscapes are gender-segregated. By this I mean that her female and male characters are generally located in specific types of landscapes or settings throughout the body of her works, the organising principle being their gender.

In philosophical terms, women and men have never occupied equal and opposite polarities of the binary oppositions which male-centred western discourses have constructed, but, for the most part, women inherit and inhabit the terrain left over from male self-construction. Many women often feel 'excluded, shunned, "frozen out", disadvantaged, unprivileged, rejected, unwanted, abandoned, dislocated, marginalized', in the words of Rosemary Tong (*Feminist Thought* 219). So, by 'gendered landscapes' I mean descriptions of physical and/or psychological landscapes, cultivated or constructed by and for men, which are gender-segregated through male design or default.

Jolley's Australian female-dominated novels—*Palomino*, *Foxybaby*, *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* and *The Well*—are set in remote rural areas, where men, if any, have only a marginal presence. However, Jolley's female characters are not new frontier heroes, but usually run or caretake institutions or farms established by men, and then abandoned. There are two exceptions to this general rule of locating women in rural settings: the English-born female heroes in *The Georges' Wife* and *The Orchard Thieves* live in the suburbs of an Australian city. Usually Jolley locates male protagonists in suburban settings, more often associated with housewives. *Mr Scobie's Riddle*, *Milk & Honey*, *The Sugar Mother* and *Lovesong* are novels set in the suburbs which feature male protagonists. Significantly, *Cabin Fever*, set in New York, has a female protagonist. This is the only novel to feature a city-centre setting.

In a personal interview in January 1997, I asked Jolley what purpose her landscape

descriptions served. Jolley replied that she uses landscape passages to parallel the emotions of her characters. However, I did not want to limit my critical understanding to the humanistic content of Jolley's works, so I have given my readings a post-structuralist thrust, which is very productive.

'Subjecthood is not a product, but the effect of language and culture', says Mary Eagleton. 'It is not a controlling position, but is subject to certain available positions in the prevailing culture.' And it is always in process (*Working with Feminist Criticism* 109). I show how we may infer from the state of the land not only women's emotions, but also, on a broader scale, our subjectivities and their conceptualization. For in her novels, Jolley projects the subjective effects of her representative characters onto the developed landscapes for our scrutiny.

Jolley relates in *Central Mischief* how, when she was a child in the industrial midlands of England, her father pointed to the ridge along a line of hills on the local landscape to describe what a water shed was. He was always explaining something, making a lesson out of everything, she says. Then, in her essay she expands on the metaphor by discussing some turning points in her own life and in her fictions which provide, as she says, 'a deep and sudden further understanding of the self' (16). Then, speaking somewhat mystically about the Western Australian landscape fifteen miles inland from Perth, where the author now lives, Jolley says that 'over and beyond this escarpment is bush and forest and partly cleared rural land. Beyond this are the wheat paddocks and the emptiness and the silence ...' (*Central Mischief* 102).

Jolley cleverly exploits the cropped wheatbelt of Western Australia, where the landscape is undergoing the process of man-induced desertification, in some of her novels as a feminine version of the desert. Conventionally, the desert has been associated with new-age figures such as Moses, Jesus Christ and the apocalyptic 'rough beast' in the poem, 'The Second Coming', by W.B. Yeats. Contrary to popular belief, deserts such as the Sahel are man-made, caused by agriculturists and pastoralists moving into fragile, arid lands. The environmentalist, Mary E. White, describes how well-vegetated lands in North Africa and the Middle East rapidly became dune deserts when they were over-exploited for economy-driven reasons (*Listen ... our land is crying* 12). Likewise, the cotton dust bowl of Central North America is the result of the ill-advised practice of monoculture, which is also practised in the wheatbelt of Western Australia. Jolley's use of the landscape in the process of desertification has obvious repercussions for female subjectivities, as I shall show in my linked discussion of *Foxybaby* and *The Well*. For the wheatbelt is an example of 'the consequences and projected afterimages' of our patriarchal and capitalistic economy (1), which degrades our landscape perception by treating it mainly as a commodity to be exploited for profit.

In an essay, Jolley describes how a once familiar childhood landscape of roadside trees and bright wildflowers, which she had enjoyed growing up on the edge of the wheat belt, has now been replaced by bare topsoil heaped up beside the re-made road. Jolley comments that changes such as these in our once-familiar landscapes makes migrants even of those of us who stay at home (*Central Mischief* 60).

However, Jolley also acknowledges that a tiny handful of unseen people in the wheatbelt produce 'enormous quantities of food' (10). With respect to such monocultural practices, White warns of the inadvisability of arid Australia, with its fragile ecosystems and highly saline water tables, of producing for export. We produce enough grain to support 80 million people, enough wool for 500 million, and enough cotton for 10 million: far in excess of the needs of our population of 18 million (12).

The consequences of bad land management practices often are not seen until later.

Forexample, the consequences of the opportunistic ploughing of the fragile arid lands of the saltbush plains of South Australia for wheat in the 'good' years only became clear when the drought returned, showing the desert created. The effect on native creatures of the rabbit-proof fence, which was built to protect the wheat crop, is noted by Jolley in these sardonic lines from *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*:

Starving emus race or plod up and down on the other side of this fence till they drop. Not a pretty sight. The emus are incidental, they are not the tourist attraction. (16)

*Foxybaby* is also set in a cold, near-deserted and almost derelict part of the wheat-belt. This is the man-made desert where a summer school of arts is held. According to my reading of this novel, a new collectively-formed female subjectivity is fostered at Trinity College by a programme of guided artistic self-expression and diet.

Driving to the College to take up a position as a temporary drama tutor, Alma Porch's car breaks down in a multiple car pile-up. She is taken by bus to the School of Arts. Here she almost goes mad trying, mostly in vain, to defend both her drama-in-progress and the sole occupancy of her twin-share room. She dislikes the physical discomfort and the compulsory harsh exercises; the near-starvation diet of lettuce and lemon juice, supplemented by illicit midnight feasts of succulent cray fish or perhaps a dainty boiled fowl; and the bawdy sexual antics which constitute the woman-made culture in Trinity College. Nevertheless, a serious and disturbing drama about an academic, Dr Steadman and his family, emerges during the rehearsals of her play.

Towards the end of term, Alma and a few of the paying guests are driven to the seaside for a picnic. Sadly, Alma discovers that she is left out of the newly adopted family which her friend, wealthy Mrs Viggars, is about to form (*Foxybaby* 259). Recalling the car crash which preceded her stay at Trinity, Alma is forced to confront the construction of personal identity. She admits that she could not have identified the other people involved in the accident at the time, only from seeing them later. She felt this to be a great lack in herself, that she should rely so much on the unreliable qualities of supposition, of imagination and invention; on fiction (*Foxybaby* 250-251). In a similar vein, Fredric Jameson labelled the 'mirage of being', the fiction of personal identity which has apparently regulated our entire existence (*Postmodernism* 338).

Significantly, Jolley uses the sea to suggest a depth model of consciousness when describing Alma's return to self-awareness:

The sound of the sea, the steady all-embracing sustained roar of the sea, the sound behind the immediate splashing sound of the waves running up and falling and running back was like a returning to consciousness. It was as if the sound carried something, bringing it nearer and nearer, and yet, as in the partly conscious, half-waking dream whatever is being brought stays as part of the background. The sustained roar suggested limitless depths, untouched and mysterious. (247)

Mrs Viggars pushes Alma forward on the beach while urging her to embrace the trio of fictional characters who appear on the horizon: Dr Steadman, his drug-addict and ex-prisoner daughter, Sandy, and her babyboy. In the drama, Dr Steadman is guilty of, but not charged with, the sexual abuse of Sandy. The foxybaby game of the novel's title refers to his un-confessed incestuous desire. Most probably he is the father of the baby boy. Paedophilia and incestuous abuse of the young by both male and female caretakers is a frequently-occurring metaphor in Jolley's fictions. This metaphor evokes for me the struggle with the inner, younger self for the purposes of self-expression.

Conventionally, a baby is the site of a new subject becoming, as when the Infant

Jesus ushered in the new Christian era. However, the new age which this feeble, drug-sickened baby heralds in is already polluted. Nevertheless the fictional world of Dr Steadman seems more real than the farcical antics which take place in Trinity College. And as Alma, her moment of awakening at hand, slowly walks forward she is about to be subsumed into the landscape of her writerly imagination, which is dominated by a man's perverse desires, and nastier than female social reality will allow. And of course it's already gendered ...

Jolley is fascinated with the vastness of the area given over to wheat in Western Australia. She reports that while driving through the wheatbelt she has been tempted to leave her car in order to walk on foot between the apparently empty wheat paddocks (*Central Mischief* 140). She gives similar sentiments to Hester Harper in *The Well*, when this wealthy landowner is tempted to leave her vehicle. Hester believes that:

[l]ife would be changed completely if a person walked all the way ... The road between the endless paddocks of wheat would lie before her quite deserted and she would accept a different view of time and journey ... She imagines the feeling of being unseen and not known about while standing in one isolated place. She would be small and safe walking and pausing to stand still low down under the immense clear blue sky. Perhaps, she thinks, her fear might disappear. It might dissolve ... (*The Well* 2)

Hester's movements through the wheat signal her ontological distress, brought about by changes in land use and her own ineptitude.

Hester and her teen-aged protegee, Katherine, whom Hester got one day in the rural store, go to lead an indulgent life in an old shepherd's cottage on a remote corner of Hester's property among the wheat. With this move, Hester abandons her family home and its support structures. However, the two women quarrel repeatedly about the male creature Katherine has run over one night and dumped down the disused well, still apparently alive. Eventually, Hester has the opening to the well closed up, sealing the prisoner within. Then, when her car runs out of petrol, Hester abandons her tiresome young friend in the midst of the brown wheat paddocks. Hester can now enjoy the feeling of her own insignificance enhanced by the indifference of the land, which makes her feel small and safe (170). She has coped with her one obsessive fear, that of losing Katherine, who probably represents a strand of her own stunted development. Finally, Hester gets a lift in the land cruiser of the wife of an up-and-coming property owner, and the novel ends as she turns around to tell her version of the story of the well to the kids in the back, while thinking of a novelist she once met.

With this novel, Jolly associates a male with the dark depths of our unconscious minds, redolent of mystery, memories and stagnation, while she relocates her female hero on the move over the surface of the land—albeit as a passenger! This version of the ending gives a politically correct view of sisterly progress: it depicts relationally-formed female subjectivities, and it tacitly acknowledges the respectful differences between women.

However, read with the degraded wheatscape and the closure of the well in mind, this scene also charts the movement from a depth to a surface model of human consciousness. The depth model, which Jolley illustrates by means of the seascape at the end of *Foxybaby*, is based on philosophies which Elizabeth Grosz describes as featuring 'the centrality of mind, the psyche, interior or consciousness'. Grosz argues that agency, reflection and consciousness, categories associated with interiority, can be remapped and refigured in non-dualist terms of the primacy of corporeality, of the surface (*Volatile Bodies* viii). Grosz' work is in part an appreciative critique of the works

of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the writers whose free-ranging post-familial philosophies are an attempt to re-define subjectivities in terms of surfaces, networks, flows and intensities.

How do particular women fare in this shift from a depth consciousness towards corporeal subjectivities? And what happens to women's specific, embodied existences in such a movement? In *The Well*, the ruthless manner in which Hester abandons Katherine shows that the girl was no more than a stage in Hester's striving towards subjectivity. Deleuze and Guattari say that 'It is not the girl who becomes a woman; it is becoming-woman that produces the universal girl' (277). It appears that women's singular lived experiences are by-passed in the move towards defining subjectivities existentially by ideas, or by the broadest of generalizations: by becomings (Phillip Goodchild 138). According to Grosz, 'indiscernibility, imperceptibility, and impersonality remain the end points of becoming' (179). So, like Alma Porch before her, Hester leaves social reality as her ontological status changes. Immanent, as a narrator complete with personal experiences, her desire now is to meet again the novelist in search of a narrator for her allegorical novella set in a remote corner of the wheat (157).

If neither the women nor the girl achieve human subjective status, who in the novel benefits from the entire enterprise? If binary oppositions are transcended, what happens to sexual difference? Becomings always pass through a becoming-woman, explain Deleuze and Guattari, who then ominously add that, 'A woman has to become-woman, but in a becoming-woman of all man' (*A Thousand Plateaus* 291-292). In this respect, it is significant that Hester *silently* notices that the numerous Borden boys, insistent in their desire for a story from the back of the land cruiser, are so much alive, that their life seems to come through their skin (*The Well* 175). It emerges that the new corporeal subjects of desire are male. Women, participating once again as a stage in a male project, are merely the vehicles, the receptacles of men's becomings, their machinic conditions (*Volatile Bodies* 182). Given the degraded, man-made desert landscape, could the projected consequences have been otherwise?

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