THI QAR ARTS JOURNAL
TQARTJ | VOL 3 NO.50 JUNE. 2025

Reclaiming the Margins: A Postcolonial Reading of *An Island* by Karen Jennings

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Received 5/5/2025, Accepted 28/5/2025, Published 30/6/2025

Abstract

The present research investigates a postcolonial reading of Karen Jennings' An Island, drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical concepts of hybridity, identity, and the Third Space to examine how the novel reflects the psychological and political consequences of colonialism, displacement, and failed nationhood. Set on a secluded island inhabited by Samuel, an aged lighthouse keeper, the story explores the junction of solitude, memory, and historical trauma. Samuel, a former political prisoner who survived both colonial and postcolonial administrations, exemplifies a fractured identity produced by violence, treachery, and solitude. When a nameless refugee shows up, the story takes a radical turn because Samuel's manufactured sense of identity and ownership is upended by his silent presence. In addition to being a physical location, the island also functions as a liminal Third Space—a location of cultural negotiation, memory, and hybridization—where this meeting takes place. Jennings criticizes the inability of the postcolonial state to address the inherited systems of marginalization and exclusion using layers of symbolism and simple writing.

According to this research , Jennings employs the island's landscape—its deteriorating colonial lighthouse, hybrid vegetation, and changing shoreline—as metaphors for the continual balancing act between the past and present as well as the instability of national identity. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, in which fixed identities disintegrate in favor of multifaceted, conflicted subjectivities, is reflected in Samuel's mental decline and his blending with the refugee. Additionally, by giving nonverbal communication, silence, and fragmented recollection precedence over formal discourse, the novel questions prevailing historical narratives. An Island emphasizes the moral and affective aspects of postcolonial life in this way. In the end, the book highlights the underlying conflicts between self and other, remembering and forgetting, exile and belonging, and challenges readers to face the lingering effects of colonial dominance in modern societies.

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استرداد الهوامش: قراءة ما بعد استعمارية لرواية "جزيرة" لكارين جينينغز

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الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث قراءةً ما بعد استعمارية لرواية "جزيرة" لكارين جينينغز، مستفيدًا من مفاهيم هومي ك. بهابها النظرية حول التهجين والهوية والفضاء الثالث، لدراسة كيفية انعكاس الرواية على العواقب النفسية والسياسية للاستعمار والنزوح وفشل بناء الأمة. تدور أحداث الرواية في جزيرة منعزلة يسكنها صموئيل، حارس منارة مُسن، وتستكشف التقاء العزلة والذاكرة والصدمة التاريخية. صموئيل، سجين سياسي سابق نجا من الإدارات الاستعمارية وما بعد الاستعمارية، يُجسد هويةً مُمزقة ناجمة عن العنف والخيانة والوحدة. عندما يظهر لاجئ مجهول الهوية، تأخذ القصة منعطفًا جذريًا لأن شعور صموئيل المُصطنع بالهوية والملكية يقلب وجوده الصامت رأسًا على عقب. بالإضافة إلى كونها موقعًا ماديًا، تُمثل الجزيرة أيضًا فضاءً ثالثًا حدوديًا – موقعًا للتفاوض الثقافي والذاكرة والتهجين – حيث يحدث هذا اللقاء. ينتقد جينينغز عجز الدولة ما بعد الاستعمارية عن معالجة أنظمة التهميش والإقصاء الموروثة، مستخدمًا طبقات من الرمزية والكتابة البسيط.

وفقًا لهذه البحث، يستخدم جينينغز مشهد الجزيرة – منارتها الاستعمارية المتدهورة، ونباتاتها الهجينة، وشاطئها المتغير – كاستعاراتٍ للتوازن المستمر بين الماضي والحاضر، بالإضافة إلى عدم استقرار الهوية الوطنية. ينعكس مفهوم بهابها للهجينية، حيث تتفكك الهويات الثابتة لصالح ذاتيات متعددة الأوجه ومتضاربة، في تدهور صموئيل العقلي واندماجه مع اللاجئ. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، ومن خلال إعطاء التواصل غير اللفظي، والصمت، والتذكر المجزأ الأولوية على الخطاب الرسمي، تُشكك الرواية في السرديات التاريخية السائدة. تُركز رواية "جزيرة" على الجوانب الأخلاقية والعاطفية للحياة ما بعد الاستعمارية بهذه الطريقة. وفي النهاية، يسلط الكتاب الضوء على الصراعات الكامنة بين الذات والآخر، والتذكر والنسيان، والمنفى والانتماء، ويتحدى القراء لمواجهة الآثار المتبقية من الهيمنة الاستعمارية في المجتمعات الحديثة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد الاستعمار، هومي بهابها، التهجين، الهوية، الفضاء الثالث، جزيرة، كارين جينينغز

1- Introduction

Karen Jennings is a South African author known for her novel *Finding Soutbek,* which was shortlisted for the Etisalat Prize for African Fiction. She has also published a memoir and a poetry collection. Her work investigates colonialism and seeks to give voice to regular, often forgotten people. (Jennings, 2021). Jennings' novel, like many of her pieces, explores how ordinary South Africans survive in the shadow of both their personal histories and the country's lengthy history of colonial conquest and anti-colonial resistance (Jennings, 2012).

Karen Jennings' novel An *Island* is a sad and allegorical exploration of solitude, memory, and the long-term impacts of colonization. The plot revolves around Samuel, a 70-year-old lighthouse keeper who has lived alone on a secluded island off the coast of an unnamed African country for more than two decades. His loneliness is broken when a child refugee washes ashore, unconscious but alive. As Samuel cares for the visitor, he is forced to confront his past, including his time under colonial authority, participation in a failed revolution, and subsequent imprisonment under a tyrant.

The novel takes place over four days, alternating between the present and Samuel's memories of his country's stormy history and personal losses. The presence of the refugee tests Samuel's sense of ownership and belonging, prompting questions about land, identity, and the human potential for compassion vs fear. Jennings' tale is both intimate and expansive, providing a microcosmic view of larger sociopolitical themes. *An Island*, which has been long-listed for the 2021 Booker

Prize, is a profound investigation of the complexity of human nature as well as the residual effects of colonization.

The central aim of this research is to investigate how postcolonial theory, specifically the concepts of identity, hybridity, and the Third Space, applies to Karen Jennings' novel *An Island*. The study investigates how the protagonist's secluded living reflects postcolonial conflicts, fractured identity, and the long-term impacts of colonialism. Using Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the Third Space, the study analyzes how cultural boundaries are blurred and reinterpreted in the novel. This analysis will look at how Jennings uses minimalist narrative and symbolic space to express postcolonial experiences of marginalization, displacement, and resistance.

Karen Jennings's *An Island* is a profound literary work that engages deeply with postcolonial themes, reflecting on the enduring consequences of colonialism, displacement, and cultural erasure. Set against the backdrop of a remote island, the novel centres on an ageing lighthouse keeper whose solitary existence is disrupted by the arrival of a mysterious refugee. This encounter opens up complex explorations of identity, memory, and the legacy of colonial violence. The novel's narrative structure and thematic concerns resonate strongly with postcolonial theory, particularly the ideas advanced by Homi Bhabha.

Postcolonial criticism emerged after World War II, in the early 1990s, and following the collapse of colonial administrations in colonized countries. During the colonial period, British colonists marched into Third and Fourth World countries to exploit them for the colonizers' economic benefit. As a result, colonizers internalized their superiority over the lesser colonized countries, discounting their culture, race, language, and identity in order to pillage the colonized. Similarly, as Lois Tyson

(2006) states in his *Critical Theory Today*, "…colonized peoples [are] any population that has been subjugated to the political domination of another population" (p. 417).

The term "postcolonialism" can generally be understood as the several political, economic, cultural and philosophical responses to colonialism from its inauguration to the present day, and is somewhat broad and extensive in scope. Postcolonialism encompasses the various repercussions and ramifications of colonial control. Although postcolonialism challenges colonialism, it is not a unified resistance strategy. Some view it as ambiguous and overly broad in its scope of inquiry (Hiddleston, 2009).

The Postcolonial literature and theory study what occurs when two cultures collide and one of them, together with its ideology, empowers and considers itself superior to the other. It typically excludes literature that represents either British or American perspectives, instead focusing on writings from colonized cultures in Australia, New Zealand, Africa, South America, and other places and societies that were once dominated by European cultural, political, and philosophical traditions (Sawant, 2012).

Postcolonialism is an interdisciplinary subject that critically studies the long-term effects of colonialism and imperialism on cultures, societies, and identities. It discusses how colonial power relations continue even after political independence, particularly through cultural, linguistic, and epistemic dominance (Loomba, 2015). Postcolonial philosophy aims to counter Eurocentric narratives and provide a voice to people who have previously been marginalized by colonial discourse. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is foundational to postcolonial studies. Said (1978) argues that "the West produced a distorted image of the East to justify domination, portraying

Eastern societies as backward, irrational, and exotic" (p. 2). His work critiques how knowledge production was used as a tool of imperial power. Robert Young (2001) suggests a historical overview of postcolonial theory, linking it with anti-colonial resistance and revolutionary movements. Young (2001) stresses "that postcolonialism is not merely an academic theory but a political practice rooted in global struggles for justice and decolonization" (p. 64).

Homi Bhabha, an important figure in postcolonial studies, contends that identity is not innate or fixed, but rather emerges in "in-between" or liminal zones where cultures interact. He employs terms like as hybridity, imitation, and ambivalence to describe how colonial subjects resist and subvert colonial power. Through hybridity, for example, the colonized rearticulate cultural symbols, resulting in new, hybrid identities that undermine colonial power (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38). These hybrid forms do not just repeat colonial discourse; rather, they reinterpret it in ways that allow for alternative narratives.

Postcolonial philosophy ultimately strives to give voice to previously repressed perspectives, question how colonial histories continue to impact global relations and develop cultural manifestations that challenge hegemonic structures (Bhabha, 1994).

As Homi Bhabha says:

Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects (...). It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but re-implicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted

on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory —or, in my mixed metaphor, a negative transparency. (Signs, 154)

The term “hybridity” has been most lately associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, whose analysis of colonizer / colonized relations stresses the inter-dependence and mutual construction of their subjectivities. Hybridization is a kind of negotiation, both political and cultural, between the colonizer and the colonized (Sawant, 2012).

According to Bhabha (1994), “identity is not innate or fixed but shaped in the friction and negotiation between competing forces. Thus, hybridity serves as a form of resistance, destabilizing colonial narratives and opening space for alternative cultural expressions” p. 37).

Homi Bhabha (1994) develops the notion of cultural hybridity, which refers to *the Third Space* formed when colonial and colonized cultures intersect. This interplay creates a hybrid identity that is neither submissive nor resistant but rather continually growing. Bhabha contends that the relationship between colonizers and colonized is characterized by ambivalence rather than unequivocal hostility. Through imitation, the colonized replicate the colonizer's language and habits, exposing flaws in colonial authority and eroding its power from within (Bhabha, 1994).

2-Discussion

2-1- The Island as a Postcolonial Third Space

The isolated island location in Jennings' novel exemplifies a traditional postcolonial liminal zone. It is geographically marginal, politically ignored, and culturally diverse. Samuel's lighthouse, previously maintained by colonial authorities, is now in disrepair: "It had been white once, last plastered in the middle of the previous century, before the colonial government left them to their independence" (Jennings, 2021, p. 51). The deteriorating lighthouse represents the abandonment and degradation of colonial infrastructure.

In the passage, “Samuel no longer thought about the previous night’s threat of a cut-throat… ‘Mine,’ he said… ‘Mine, mine, mine!’” (Jennings, 2021, p. 52), the obsessive repeating of "Mine" demonstrates a postcolonial fear about sovereignty and possession. Samuel's compulsive claim to the island might be interpreted through the lens of Homi Bhabha's *Third Space* as an attempt to impose control in a location marked by hybridity and instability. The term "Mine" thus goes beyond tangible possession to become a symbolic act of recovering authority and declaring identity in a transitional region where colonial and postcolonial conflicts converge.

Furthermore, the island's changing shape— “Slowly the island began to change shape. Had a helicopter been in the habit of flying over, its pilot would note the widening of the small bays” (Jennings, 2021, p. 49)— implying a metaphorical remaking of national and personal identity. Samuel's hybrid garden, which combines foreign and local vegetation, represents the Third Space by recombining cultural forms.

2-2-Fractured Identity and Postcolonial Subjectivity

Samuel's identity is the result of both colonial trauma and national treachery. He was imprisoned for political dissent and now lives in self-imposed exile. His memories convey a deep sense of loss and alienation: "That other world had vanished behind them" (Jennings, 2021, p. 27). The refugee's presence undermines Samuel's already weak sense of self. Initially seeing the refugee as an intruder, he eventually discovers shared experiences of displacement and brutality.

Samuel's internal conflict is best illustrated when he says, "He was old… Was it to go on like this, then? This incessant movement in his home. This home that had been his alone…" (Jennings, 2021, p. 14). His discomfort with the refugee's presence extends beyond physical space to psychological area. He believes his identity is being supplanted by another past, another presence.

At first, the island serves as Samuel's self-imposed haven from the political unrest on the mainland and his own horrific background. He is a lone man who has "moulded and tamed and built the place to be what it was" over his 23 years as a lighthouse keeper (Jennings, 2021, p. 114). After years of incarceration and displacement, this sense of ownership and control over the island is fundamental to his identity and signifies the reclaiming of agency. He feels that he has effectively isolated the island from the outside world, and it is "his and his alone" (Jennings, 2021, p. 114) a space he believes he has successfully insulated from the outside world.

"Do what you like. We don't want them." (Jennings, 2021, p. 7) — This outright rejection of drowned refugees reveals long-standing postcolonial marginalization and

racism. The speaker's apathy demonstrates the state's moral detachment and inability to connect with displaced people. Although the state claims autonomy and independence, its dismissive tone betrays a mixed identity moulded by colonial legacies. The colonial mindset persists in xenophobic views, in which certain lives are regarded unworthy of rescue or integration. This moment highlights the paradoxes inside the postcolonial nation, which strives for autonomy while continuing the restrictive and degrading behaviours of its previous colonizers.

In the declaration, "This is the land… It is my body, and my body is it" (p. 56), the speaker combines human identification with the land, declaring a nationalist promise based on territorial belonging. This combination of self and soil indicates a postcolonial attempt to restore agency and rootedness in the aftermath of colonialism. However, as Homi Bhabha argues, postcolonial identity emerges from a Third Space—a hybrid, ambivalent location defined by mimicry and contradiction. The speaker's complete affinity with the land paradoxically replicates colonial possession rhetoric, in which territory was linked with power and identity. This mimicry, rather than empowering, reveals the fundamental conflicts of postcolonial nationalism: an attempt to define oneself through the very systems that it seeks to reject.

2-3- Hybridity Negotiation in *An Island*

Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity is deeply shown by Samuel's act of embedding bodies into the dry-stone wall, as stated in "He had begun to fashion a dry-stone wall… into this outer wall that he began to introduce the bodies" (Jennings, 2021, pp. 49–50). The living and the dead, the present and the painful past, come together in this wall, which turns into a "third space" or transitional area. With its hideous contents, it is a framework that both marks and blurs boundaries, both excluding and

including. The island's terrain becomes a hybrid creature as a result of this physical representation of memory and violence, mirroring the erratic, fractured character of postcolonial identity in which memories are frequently buried but never completely absent.

Samuel's battle with his identity, which becomes closely tied to the young man he saves, is one of the most powerful examples of hybridity. Samuel's carefully cultivated seclusion is upended by the stranger's presence, which forces him to face memories of his time as a political prisoner. By projecting his own horrific memories onto the newcomer, Samuel blurs the boundaries between victim and perpetrator, rescuer and saved. The story suggests a profoundly unnerving link, as though the stranger is a ghostly Doppelgänger—a corporeal representation of Samuel's suppressed personality. The internal monologue, "There was no one but himself. He was alone. Yet, he knew that wasn't true," (Jennings, 2021, p. 53) encapsulates this hybrid state. Samuel is alone in his physical space, yet he is tormented by an internal presence – a hybrid self-composed of his current isolated state and the intrusive, unbidden memories personified by the stranger.

Hybridity is shown in *An Island* as a horrifying but unavoidable result of unresolved trauma and the weight of history. Originally intended as a haven, Samuel's island becomes a physical and mental prison where his history, present, and fractured self are all inexorably linked to the land he lives on. The stranger represents Samuel's own mingled identity, a composite of his innocence and guilt, his memories and his insanity, all enshrined in the very stones of his seclusion, rather than just being an outside threat. Through the hybrid nature of both mind and land,

Jennings skillfully illustrates how the self, when freed from intense pain, may become a frightening blend of what was, what is, and what might have been.

2-4-Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History in *An Island*

Karen Jennings' An Island examines the psychological and historical consequences of postcolonial violence through the lenses of memory and trauma. Her minimalist literary approach reflects the fragmented and unreliable character of traumatic memory, transporting the reader into Samuel's unstable psyche. Samuel's recollections, as a former political prisoner now living alone as a lighthouse keeper, are unpredictable and intrusive.

Jennings underlines from the beginning that Samuel is plagued by his history.

"These memories, these memories, hunting him down, taking possession of him" (Jennings, 2021, p. 10).

This repetition illustrates how trauma supplants reason, implying that memory in this situation is more a sign of unresolved psychological suffering than a means of preserving history. Instead of following a chronological progression, the narrator evokes a cyclical temporality in which the past keeps interrupting the present. This is consistent with Homi Bhabha's Third Space theory, which holds that identity and time are hybridized and non-linear, especially in postcolonial settings.

Jennings further conveys this disorientation through imagery that evokes the repetitive and inescapable nature of memory: "Memories were there too, coming fast that morning – things best forgotten now approaching as steadily as waves approach the shore" (Jennings, 2021, p. 12).

Samuel's mental captivity is strengthened by the island's remoteness, and the ocean's steady rhythm reflects the recurrence of unpleasant memories. Time seems to stop, resulting in a circular atmosphere where history can only be endured rather than resolved or avoided. The way history is constructed is a further aspect of Jennings' criticism. An alternative story to the prevailing historical discourse that Samuel represents is presented by the entrance of an unnamed refugee on the island. The refugee's story is conveyed through drawings, silences, and gestures rather than words. Jennings writes:

"The man pointed at the sea, then at the island, then at himself. He picked up a stick and began to draw pictures in the sand" (Jennings, 2021, p. 53).

These nonverbal communication methods highlight the ways in which traditional, state-approved records frequently do not provide access to postcolonial histories. Instead of being a type of nothingness, the refugee's silence is an alternative form of witness that speaks through embodiment and metaphor and circumvents official channels.

Samuel, however, resists engaging with this alternative history. His instinct is to protect his territory and reinforce his isolation. He even envisions a coming influx of outsiders as a threat:

"He suspects his visitor is a refugee … 'floating on the water, searching for a place to land" (Jennings, 2021, p. 59). This reaction reinforces the exclusivity of national memory by reflecting a larger trend to suppress or erase minority histories.

Ultimately, *An Island* criticizes the ways that history is recorded, remembered, and suppressed in addition to the psychological harm caused by institutional violence. Jennings creates a potent metaphor for postcolonial historical

negotiation in which the shattered and disputed character of national identity is reflected in the interior pain of the person. She challenges us to reevaluate whose tales history documents and whose it silences by dramatizing a conflict between memory and forgetfulness, mute and voice, and official history vs lived experience through Samuel and the refugee.

3- Conclusion

This research examines *An Island* by Karen Jennings through the prism of postcolonial theory, with a particular emphasis on Homi Bhabha's themes of hybridity, identity, and the Third Space. The investigation revealed how Jennings employs the island location as a literal and symbolic place of marginalization and negotiation. Samuel's broken identity, forged by colonial aggression and national betrayal, displays the psychological scars of past traumas. His encounter with the immigrant shakes his delicate sense of self, resulting in a hybrid realm where cultural boundaries melt. The work criticizes both the colonial past and the inadequacies of post-independence nationalism, exposing how both repress minority voices. Through symbolic elements like the decaying lighthouse, the hybrid garden, and the silent refugee, Jennings foregrounds the instability and ambivalence of postcolonial subjectivity. Finally, An Island does not provide a solution but rather highlights the ongoing challenges of memory, identity, and belonging in postcolonial circumstances. It challenges readers to address the ongoing effects of the colonial past, as well as the ethical obligations of acknowledgement, empathy, and historical redress.

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