

Kyzlinková, Lidia

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LIDIA KYZLINKOVÁ

## RENDELL/VINE: THE HISTORICAL UNIVERSALITY OF DEGRADATION BETWEEN NATIONS AND GENDERS

The contemporary British female crime novel tends to reflect the very substance of social conflicts existing in multicultural Britain. Ruth Rendell's random samples, six popular crime thrillers from different decades, including the one written under the pseudonym of Barbara Vine, address racial awareness and femininity from the standpoint of disturbing social terror, based on gender differentiation. With the exception of *Simisola* (Rendell 1994) and *Road Rage* (Rendell 1997), the other novels observed are the so-called "non-Wexford mysteries", *A Demon in My View* (Rendell 1976), *A Fatal Inversion* (Vine 1987), *Adam, Eve and Pinch Me* (Rendell 2001), and *The Rottweiler* (Rendell 2003), that is crime fiction without any prominent detective or traditional closure. The narratives display symbolic relationships closely connected with race, nation and belonging, and define women as archetypal victims of male sexual oppression. At the same time, a predominantly urban environment with its counter-cultures and subcultures is revealed, where new antitechnological, youth and ecological movements replace old ritual patterns of relationships between individuals in the community.

In Rendell/Vine's two earlier novels, *A Demon in my View* and *A Fatal Inversion*, apart from issues concerned with politically motivated femininity, the power and experience of "whiteness" suggest another form of contemporary ethnicity with further cultural implications. Both Arthur Johnson from the first novel mentioned, the protagonist presenting an immaculate image of conservative Englishness, and Adam Verne-Smith from the second, a somewhat younger specimen abandoning the importance of traditional appearance, yet, representing the same mode of conservative superiority, murder innocent women. Adam's close friend, successful Rufus, who becomes a private gynaecologist later, can be seen as a white oppressor in a very intimate area of femininity, experienced by women of all ages and backgrounds at some point in their lives. Much more transparently colonial and imperialist attitudes towards women as "barbarians" can be examined in the whole post-colonial context in *Simisola*. *The Rottweiler* illustrates a considerable shift from the generally accepted political correctness, which lends unquestioning support to ethnic minorities in every case of insinu-

ated racial discrimination. The cunningly smart representatives of ethnic origin, Zeinab and Anwar, are far from needing any assistance. The white male Englishmen, old and young, including the murderer, become clear losers in the multicultural game of life. The white English women, old and young, tend to be exploited, terrorized and victimized.

In *A Fatal Inversion*, Zosie's alleged "whiteness" and traditionally popular English girlish looks are frequently emphasized in places:

Her hair was like a cap of fawn satin. [...] She had a face like all the drawings there had ever been of fairy girls on birthday cards and illustrated children's books. [...] Rufus saw only a small, slender, finely-made-up girl [...] Her attractions made themselves felt slowly and then grabbed you by the throat. (Vine 1987: 134–135)

Yet, despite her traditional looks, compared with a custard-cream pack of typical English biscuits, "Zosie is the same colour as those biscuits, matt, smooth and lightly baked" (127), Zosie stands for representations of child abuse, rape and unconventional commune culture on the one hand, and homelessness on the other, fearing a finality of belonging nowhere. Asian beauty Zeinab from *The Rottweiler* has a loving partner, family and home. However, both of the liars unscrupulously indicate they are after material wealth, which they regard as necessary for a fundamental change in their status. Zosie, abandoned by her parents, seems to have lost everything. She claims she let Rufus rape her to be given a lift and accommodation, her sanctuary. "A fine tracery of bluish marks" (163) allows Rufus to diagnose her previous pregnancy, her experience of giving birth to a child who might have died or been taken away from her. He remains indifferent, and nobody thus realizes Zosie's need to kidnap any baby, and by extension, any shelter, or any new identity. She has no choice, and her previous experience and trauma predestine her for further exploitation.

Zeinab tells lies much more skilfully and uses her ethnic beauty and youthful appearance to acquire expensive gifts from the English fiances she goes out with at different times. The never punctual and cheating Asian girl treats her suitors unmercifully and ensures that she brings all the bounty back home for her somewhat weaker lover, two children and mother, who all obviously benefit from her deceitful behaviour. Some ethnic characters in *The Rottweiler* have thus significantly moved from a kind of dependent and imitating approach to Englishness in the novels depicting the 1970s and 1980s towards informed and masterfully targeted attitudes at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as an exceptionally intelligent teenage Indian, Anwar, mentioned above, testifies. His sisters, however, are far from being similarly independent:

They regarded him much as young Victorian girls saw their brother, as one who through chance happened to be male and therefore untrammelled, away from parental constraint and free. This, notwithstanding the fact

that their mother and father were enlightened people who required no more of their daughters and expected of them no different standard of behaviour than of their son. But tradition dies hard and each of these girls, exposed to the views of elderly relatives, had yet to put ideas of the sheltered life, the long skirts, the chaperoned outings and the arranged marriage, behind her. (Rendell 2003: 264)

Unlike Anwar's sisters, Zeinab is much less troubled with traditions and rituals. She cleverly invents a nonexistent cruel and orthodox Muslim father, who would never allow her suitors to bring her home late at night, let alone spend the night with her. Zeinab thus uses her ancestors' Islamic faith and obviously pretentious strict moral upbringing as significant assets and excuses at the same time, and forces both of her two men to agree to the future marriage, with expensive engagement presents, celibate outings and decent dinners before. It is Zeinab that takes advantage of English "gentlemen" in love, making full use of the admired qualities of her race and gender. The male representatives treat Zeinab in quite a different way from commonsensical attitudes in contemporary relationships with ordinary white Englishwomen, and are prepared to tolerate any "Oriental Otherness" (Said) of hers, which in their eyes only enhances their true-love's merits. (As Said puts it, the image of the Oriental is not only associated with "lamentable alien identity", it also covers "an interesting cultural resonance", in particular in the area of sensuality; Said 1978: 201–11) Ethnic female sexuality in *The Rottweiler* is thus not problematized, and young and beautiful Zeinab is shown as a fully integrated and effectively calculating woman. Another noticeable shift from stereotypical portrayals of ethnic women can be traced in connection with Roxane, a beautiful young model of half-Indian origin from *Road Rage*. Unfortunate Roxane, dearly loved by her English mother, suffers from claustrophobia, so there is nothing irrational or savage about her. The corrupted leaders of the ecological movement in this novel represent both domination and subordination within one community, as they serve the rich Struthers, who pretentiously act in the name of democratic and anti-racist populism.

In *The Rottweiler*, the individual residents, their boyfriends and girlfriends, the house owner Inez and her employee, the shop-assistant Zeinab, her two suitors, customers, next door neighbours, relatives, and friends, such as the above mentioned Anwar and his gang, including Zuluetta the policeman, make a typical human menagerie of British multicultural society. Surprisingly, Englishness is not shown as a distinguishing factor against the various origins of the pawns, that is the individual tenants, including the mentally disturbed murderer, which could be claimed in connection with *A Demon in My View*. Even though *The Rottweiler* examines new patterns of collective action in the urban community to some extent, the structure and proportion of the plot of both the novels stated are comparable in many ways. The anti-heroic protagonist, the schizophrenic murderer Alexander Gibbons alias Jeremy Quick, who remains devoted to his mother under any circumstances, is recruited from the same kind of restricted conservative

background, similarly to Arthur Johnson. Repressed sexuality and sexual traumas experienced during their vulnerable and difficult teenage years are certainly at the root of the problems in both of these tragic psychopathic creatures. The never-ending exploitation of the protagonists when adolescents, whose inferior position was constantly reinforced by an adult through conservative codes and orders, is presented by Rendell as one of the clues leading to further instability, isolation and lack of confidence, dangerously twisted towards an irresistible urge to avenge themselves in the course of their mental breakdown.

Although it is the women that are exploited and victimized in the majority of the novels analyzed, the stories are told from the male characters' standpoints, with the exception of *The Rottweiler* and *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me*. The former novel is primarily narrated from the house and antique-shop owner Inez Ferry's perspective, and in the latter novel, one tends to empathize with the tragic heroine, Minty Knox, whose troubles and thoughts, adventures and antics constitute the centre of the plot. However, in both of the novels, a great many other characters, male and female, disclose their problematic lifestyles, familial responsibilities, emotions and efforts through their inner monologues. Thus Fiona, Michelle and Matthew, Jerry/Jock/Jeff, aptly named Leach, who uses women and lives on them, his undivorced gypsy-like ex-wife Zillah, newly married to a Conservative MP, rich, dark and handsome homosexual "Jims", who needs her and the children to build up a conventional background and so improve his chances in the forthcoming elections, and many others, form a colourful kaleidoscope of the superior masters and exploited subjects in *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me*. The images of different individuals living side by side yet estranged from one another form typical themes of Rendell's narratives.

In *Simisola*, it is Wexford's black Doctor, Raymond Akande, who loses his strength. His wife Laurette, with her steady demeanour, seems unexceptionally successful and composed before it is discovered that she restricted and categorically disapproved of the ways of their daughter Melanie, also depicted as a much hardier individual in comparison with her emotional father. Again, similarly to the reference related to Anwar's sisters mentioned above, Victorian attitudes to women are contrasted in connection with Melanie's situation:

Wexford was beginning to pity Melanie Akande, a seriously pressurized young woman. The irony was that it looked as if she had had no more chance of escape from forcible education than a Victorian girl had from its denial. And like that Victorian, she was obliged to live at home for an unforeseeable future. (Rendell 1995: 129)

For a long period Melanie is believed kidnapped and most probably dead, and hardly anybody cherishes any hopes of finding her alive. Her parents, in particular Laurette, can feel Wexford deal with them as ethnic minority members worthy of special consideration. When it is certain that the dead girl's body is not their daughter's, Laurette's feeling of injustice and humiliation bursts out without control:

How dare you treat us like that? You're just a damned racist like the rest of them. Coming to our house patronizing us, the great white man condescending to us, so magnanimous, so liberal...! [...] It was because she was black, wasn't it? I haven't seen her but I know, I can see it all. One black girl's just the same as another to you, isn't she? (208)

Wexford is aware of the differently concerned approach with which he handles the investigation, an approach he would not have adopted for any white English people involved. He desperately wants to show he is not too "high up to take care of it" (22), as Laurette Akande, lacking her husband's internalized Englishness, suggests. The reader's immediate supposition is that the black girl Melanie Akande has been kidnapped and that her life is in acute danger, and "blackness" is then stereotypically equated with colonial approaches, that is English or British exploitation, slavery and classified underestimation:

But we're different, as far as he is concerned, we're what he calls the upper crust. He says that some people are destined to be hewers of wood and drawers of water. [...] For him some people are born to be slaves and wait on others. (368–369)

Kidnapping practices can be compared to colonial experience, where colonizers deprive their slaves of human dignity, freedom and a reason for living. The hostage Roxane Masood, the Indian girl, is the only victim among the kidnapped in *Road Rage*, and the novel thus significantly questions the issues of race and colonialism too, even if seemingly concerned only with predominantly environmental themes and political movements. However, it is again women that are kidnapped, raped, killed, abused, and terrorized, and this time the oppressors seem to identify with crowds of informed protesters against a by-pass that will undoubtedly destroy the peace and natural habitat of Rendell's fictional Kingsmarkham. The novel reveals the closest relatives' mutual support, distress, and anxieties for the kidnapped, including Wexford. The novel also presents the oppressingly organized role of the media, another power in question, imposing their truths and concepts on the people.

Discussion of ethnicity does not need to be associated with people of colour only; in many respects it is also by implication a discussion of gender and sexuality. For example, in *Simisola* a white middle-class Englishwoman, Annette Bystock, has been made use of as a sex slave by a certain Bruce Snow, who claims their relationship was purely physical:

For some reason Wexford thought suddenly of Annette coming here, hiding in the alley, tapping on the back door, being brought up that winding stair by Snow to his office where there wasn't even a couch, where there was not the means to produce a drink or even a cup of tea. The phone was there, though, in case his wife called him. (123)

In fear of losing his orderly and successful world the cold Mr Snow, a married professional with three children, never takes Miss Bystock out, never makes a visit to her flat, or meets her anywhere else but in his office, to which she is usually summoned by a telephone call. Although Snow is not responsible for her death, their nine-year-long relationship shows every sign of slavery, implying that “slaves are more uniformly female than black” (Rowland 2001: 84). Interestingly, towards the end of the novel, Rendell shows that the colour of one’s skin need not be an issue. Black English Melanie, who does not feel attracted to white English Christopher following her, is left alone by him despite his acquired taste for black girls: “Luckily for her, Melanie didn’t fancy *him* and he was no doubt afraid to attempt the rape of a free and independent young woman” (Rendell 1995: 377).

In *Simisola*, slavery is also broadly discussed in relation to the Celts enslaved first by the Romans, later by the Angles and Saxons. Women must have been forced to provide a great many services for the powerful warriors, and female infanticide might have been a wide practice in certain areas, as Rendell suggests. Through the Conservative electoral candidate, Anouk Khoori, and her husband, a wealthy Kuwaiti national, the reader learns how families from the Gulf States bring servants back to Britain as family members or friends with no status as domestics and consequently no protection from abuse, so they gradually become invisible and secret slaves. The situations of the middle-class Melanie and the enslaved and repeatedly raped and tortured frail maid, Sojourner-Simisola, whose identity is restored only after her death, are then markedly different, though both of them share a Nigerian origin. The criminal Ridings, the brilliant paediatric surgeon Swithun and his exquisitely educated son Christopher, represent conservative white male middle-class Englishness. It is young Sophie Riding who finally discloses her father and brother’s practices to the police, realizing that her own negligence and her mother’s ignorance are equivalent to racism and shared guilt.

In contrast to *Simisola* and *Road Rage*, racial and ethnic “otherness” is respected in the other novels explored. Even the most conspicuous ethnic characters do not provoke any hateful feelings, apart from the asocial psychopathic murderers who largely demonstrate racist attitudes. Besides race, gender, sexuality, and victimized women, it is also generational issues that are put forward in *The Rottweiler*, mainly illustrated through one of the protagonists, Inez Ferry, and one minor character, the murderer’s mother, Dorothy Margaret Gibbons. Both widowed and lonely, the women painfully observe youth and lead secluded and routine lives of rare enjoyment and pleasure. When an older man, such as the ridiculous prototype of conventional Englishness, Morton Phibling, sets on marrying a three times younger Asian beauty, it is far from frowned upon by anybody, while still middle-aged and presentable Inez would not think of any closer relationship with a younger respectful and friendly tenant, because it is somehow not socially acceptable. Old Mrs Reem Sharif, Zeinab’s mother, who is comfortable whenever munching cream chocolates or Asian takeaways while watching television with her grandchildren, and knowledgeable teenage Indian drop-out, Anwar, the chief

of the burglar gang consisting of three down-trodden drug-addicted youngsters of English origin, constitute both palpably comic and sombre elements. Anwar the blackmailer, actually assists the police and points at the Rottweiler. Of course, he never dreams of giving them more than they deserve to know. It is Anwar who steals an old abandoned abaya from his parents' house and uses the clever disguise of the hijab to impersonate a vulnerable woman of ethnic origin to be able to collect the ransom money from the murderer, Anwar, who manages to escape and who later shows the evidence of a garroting attempt on his neck to the police. He is intelligent enough not to overdo his concern:

“I thought you'd be over the moon when I came to you with the best lead to the Rottweiler's identity you're likely to get.” Anwar wasn't really indignant. He didn't care. If the police did nothing after the evidence he was giving them, he would get hold of the media and see what they made of the law's indifference... (Rendell 2003: 324)

In *The Rottweiler* Rendell thus presents entirely inverted images of widely accepted and stereotypically acknowledged prejudices attached to ethnicity: as stated before, it is beautiful Zeinab, exaggerating her ethnic background and duties, who inventively and effectively exploits the male representations of Englishness, and meticulously organized Indian Anwar, who finally outwits both the sexually tormented English murderer and the police.

The representations of conservative Englishness are also shown through the policemen, Wexford and Burden, despite their overall humanization in both Wexford whodunits examined, *Simisola* and *Road Rage*. Chief Inspector Reginald Wexford, who stands for the state and the establishment authorities, is visibly troubled in *Simisola*, which is the most significant of the novels analyzed in addressing diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and contemporary racist and colonial/imperial practices, aptly illustrating Laura Chrisman's comparison of imperialism with sexual allegory (Williams and Chrisman 1993: 498–516). Rendell lets well-read Wexford quote Tennyson's words of the mythical King Arthur, when defeated. After making mistakes because of racist assumptions in his attitudes but also because of assumptions about his own family members, in particular his daughters, Wexford has to start the never-ending mission from the beginning, or as Rowland puts it, “Wexford returns to learn a different kind of Englishness: one that needs to renegotiate the legacy of colonialism and respect a diversity of ethnic cultures living within England” (Rowland 2001: 85). Women's access to employment and their frequent roles as subservient and enslaved servants are challenged, and the exploitation of servants seems a recurrent theme here, despite a liberal approach towards a Filipino maid by an enlightened employer. In *Road Rage*, Wexford is equally humble and understanding, experiencing the same colonial and post-colonial terrorizing ideologies related to the kidnapped hostages, whose majority is formed by women. Somewhat over-positive portrayals of ethnic characters may be found in *Adam and Eve* and *Pinch Me*,

in which the Wilsons illustrate a middle-class black family, conscious of their achievement and success. Their affectionate ways, unassuming behaviour and pride in sincere blackness and justice in general powerfully contrast with the main female character Minty's "bleached" and pathological Englishness.

The historically powerless and exploited dependants, regarded as mere objects or property are found in different degrees everywhere across the class-and-generation divided community related to both ethnicity and Englishness. The continuation of colonialism is embodied in contemporary slave masters who seem to be taking advantage of employing servants from abroad, making sure they have limited immigration rights, and find it therefore hard to escape when treated like slaves. In *Simisola*, Chief Inspector Wexford scrutinizes his own racist gaze at the Akandes. In *The Rottweiler*, teenage Indian Anwar's victory over the middle-aged murderer with typically English qualities, which was based on a female Islamic dress to take the focus away from his male body, can be regarded as symbolic. The Asian, but obviously atheist or (ignorantly and indifferently) Muslim Zeinab displays all the confused messages of a Western culture which encourages women to look sexy yet condemns them for provoking men to rape; Mrs Anouk Khoori's gender-related gaze and power is so acute that it proves difficult to escape from. The cultural diversity of British society is thus shown through pathological as well as other characters' complex and tortured minds frustrated with malcommunication and unfulfilled expectations: the atmosphere of claustrophobia seems a crucial part of the psychological rationale for the murders (Munt 1994: 17–20). With their intricate plots and precise domestic detail, Rendell/Vine's texts uncompromisingly exhibit oppressive human relationships featuring different females who experience crude reality in unwelcoming masculine society with persisting degradation and tyranny.

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