

# Ruth Rendell/Barbara Vine: Social Thriller, Ethnicity and Englishness

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Ruth Rendell is viewed as one of the main representatives of the British psychological crime novel today, however, apart from her interest in the individual characters' psyches she purposefully covers a number of fundamental social phenomena existing in contemporary Britain.<sup>1</sup> I select three of Rendell's well-known crime thrillers (one written under her pseudonym of Barbara Vine) that are deeply disturbing from the social viewpoint. All three of them are her non-Wexford mysteries, i.e. without the so-called 'Great Detective' (Chief Inspector Wexford), where the police factor is considerably diminished and which I term socio-psychological, or social thrillers: *A Demon In My View* (Rendell, 1976), *A Fatal Inversion* (Vine, 1987), and *The Crocodile Bird* (Rendell, 1993). The novels clearly link the conservative cultural modes of the Victorian past with contemporary social experience of Englishness, where ethnicity and identity constitute the most significant issues. Rendell's positive obsession with the English language and literature through which she intensifies the specific Englishness of her writing is gradually becoming more and more visible in each of the decade in question: With *The Crocodile Bird* this aspect forms a crucial part of the plot.

The issues of class and ethnicity may still be regarded as the greatest sources of division in contemporary British society, and both of these are closely related to the central theme of the first two novels analysed. In *A Fatal Inversion*, which deals with both the 1970s and 1980s, race, class and immigration seem fundamentally significant. Shiva, whose father loves England 'with the innocent worship of the immigrant who has made good, who has found the mother country indeed to be the land of milk and honey' (*FI* 126),<sup>2</sup> has an entirely different experience: For Adam and Rufus he remains just 'the Indian', someone peculiar and strange, or boring, in particular when he tries to engage Rufus in conversations concerning the medical profession, his interest and desire. Rufus, who has grown up in the safety of an upper-middle-class milieu and who is unswervingly confident about his future successful medical career, appears 'curiously indifferent to the subject, acting on the amazing assumption that anyone could get into medical school if he or she wanted to' (*FI* 185). Adam, from a posh area of London, who suddenly becomes amazingly rich at the age of nineteen and whose father envies him 'an address in which the name of the street might be left out without causing inconvenience to the post office' (*FI* 48), has never had a chance to speak to an Indian, and finds therefore any closer contact with Shiva awkward. The irony is that Shiva is English, was born in England, has never seen India and is not at all knowledgeable about it. His answer to the issue of ethnic minorities is assimilation, as he does not care about 'the kamizes and saris, the festivals and phylacteries, the tongues and traditions' (*FI* 128). His wife Lili's Punjabi clothes embarrass him, similarly is he dismayed ten years before to find out his then girlfriend Vivien's enthusiasm for his ethnic origins rather than for him as an

individual. He is fully aware of her disappointment when Vivien, with all her interest in mysticism, Eastern philosophy and religion, discovers that he, though of Indian roots, is just like anybody else and has nothing to offer her. Yet he has 'all the immigrant's protective reactions and all his self-consciousness' (*FI* 20), so that it is important for him not to be left out: His ambition is to get accepted by Adam and Rufus, of whom he is in awe, and to break their indifference towards him. Even after a ten-year period this acknowledged dismissal is clearly apparent in Shiva's face, and his attempt to smile at Adam stems from 'a desire to ingratiate and to defend himself, to turn away wrath' (*FI* 20). Adam is perhaps no longer only indifferent:

He could make out several dark-skinned people, men and women of African, West Indian and Indian origin. Adam had not always been a racist but he was one now. He thought how remarkable it was that these people could afford to travel about Europe. (*FI* 15)

The whole ransom idea, the last horrific step leading to the murder, is again a kind of bid of Shiva's for attention. And he is pleased because they have listened to him. It is partly his immigrant mentality that makes him then gradually decline 'in his fortunes, his fate, his happiness and his prosperity' (*FI* 20) after all those implicated in the frightful events at Wyvis Hall/Ecalpemos go their separate ways. The contrast between Rufus' and Adam's parts of London and the unsalubrious and dangerous Eastern area where ethnic tension spreads and acts of violence become an everyday affair, is dramatic. It is in the latter area that Shiva lives and dies, a victim of the hatred of the West Indian community, which contributes to the overall effect of portraying the unhealthy nature of divisions in the British nation, based on people's roots and colour. Unfortunate squalid ghettos, where racial minorities reside, may make a smaller ethnic community an easy target of the others' intolerance. The writer manages to articulate the absurdity of it all:

The graffiti, done with aerosol paint, read: Go Home to Pakistan. Shiva stretched his mouth into a bitter smile. He was remembering forebears of his, his grandfather and his father's uncles, who had hated the name of Pakistan more than any Walthamstow Jamaican or Irishman could conceive of. (*FI* 267)

Through the character of Shiva the writer questions the many assumptions connected with ethnicity, such as its stress on descent, 'presumed family ties' or 'the sense of a community of customs' (Smith 1991: 39), in particular when ethnic minorities do not belong to the dominant ethnic community, which in this case Rendell/Vine mockingly describes as 'white, Caucasian and of more or less Anglo-Saxon-Celtic-Norse-Norman ancestry' (*FI* 19). Shiva, whose name immediately evokes one of the gods of the Hindu trinity, the destroyer, represents the racial Other. Even if he does not press the trigger, he is responsible for the murder, and he can therefore be considered a criminal in accord with the Orientalist discourse. The Other signifies a threat, similarly to the dangerous Chinaman in classic detective fiction. Adam and Rufus of the upper-middle-class status stand for White identity with their 'easy post-colonialist commonsensical attitudes of functional racism' (Munt 1994: 85), excluding or being indifferent to the Indian Other: 'In the neighbourhood where Adam lived it happened to him seldom to see any but white people, so naturally he confused one dark-skinned person with another' (*FI* 18). The individual characters thus give illuminating examples of theories Edward Said presents in his famous *Orientalism*, from the point of view of the Occident. The same perspective is apparent in the following novel discussed.

Vivien, who is of Jewish origin, represents an entirely different Other. Through her and other women in the focus, the issue of ethnicity mingles with the problem of female identity, and in particular, with the questions of independence, sexual autonomy, and sense of duty. Vivien is an honest and responsible woman. Because of her the house is tidy and the others can eat the bread she makes. She urges everyone to return the kidnapped child immediately, she feels they must tell the police about the subsequent tragedy, however, she finds no support. She is convincingly depicted as a positive squatter keen on communes and meditation, interested in the meaning of life and in how to be good, and she forms a sharp contrast to Zosie, a white English girl. Zosie is a pilfering liar, never revealing her real identity. Without any clothes or money, Zosie's position is more difficult than Liza's from *The Crocodile Bird*, in which similar issues are explored. Both young females, Zosie and Liza, suffer from the loss of identity out of different reasons: The former is abused and abandoned, the latter over-sheltered and isolated. Without home or friends, Zosie, who is compared to a waif, 'a piece of property which is found ownerless and which, if unclaimed within a fixed period after due notice given, falls to the lord of the manor' (FI 101), does belong to the owner of the house, Adam Verne-Smith. The white male conservative protagonists, Adam and Rufus, represent English traditionalists in the novel. Although they rebel and vow 'they would never give in to those bourgeois values and customs' (FI 107) when young, ten years later both of them follow the patterns of their parents' behaviour. Zosie, on the other hand, always admits she would prefer to marry a rich man and live in the beautiful country house she identifies with to some extent.

The characters of ethnic origin in *A Demon in My View* play much more minor roles than Shiva in *A Fatal Inversion*. Yet certain social phenomena reflecting mutual relationships between the white English community and ethnic minorities appear. The novel is approximately a decade older than the one dealt with before, and is therefore concerned with the atmosphere of the 1970s only, without making comparisons with the situation in the 1980s, nor paying attention to the first and second generations of immigrants in Britain, nor examining the problem of identity and pointing the racial tension and violence we frequently witness in the above mentioned text. In *A Demon in My View* the ethnic background depicted is more static and factual. However, the description of a certain London area through a white English newcomer's eyes, is nonetheless lively and critical:

Practical again, he noted mundane things. The Vale Cafe' for quick, cheap snacks; Kemal's Kebab House, smelling of cumin and sesame and fenugreek, for when he wanted to splash a bit; a pub—the Waterlily, it was called. [...] Not many truly English people about. Brown women pushing prams with black babies in them, gypsy-looking women with hard, worn faces, Indian women with Marks and Spencers woolly cardigans over lilac and gold and turquoise saris. (DV 30)

The Taj Mahal used to be called the Odeon and there are only Indian films on now. However, no malice accompanies the statement, nor any disappointment is shown over the fact that the seemingly new Asian culture has pushed off the original one and dominates the area, thus restricting the options for non-ethnic inhabitants. One is inclined to believe in a happily indifferent symbiosis of different cultures. There is a Taiwanese girl, Li-li Chan, depicted as a little flower. She may be seen as a comic character to some extent, not important, always giggling and phoning, with 'a high clipped voice', and taken in or out by some rich boyfriends. There is no doubt about Li-li's activities, which is effectively creating the usual stereotype:

Me, I don't know what men mean. I don't try to know. I love them all a little bit. You like to go on my list? Then when I come back from Taiwan I make you number three, four? (*DV* 163)

Here again the position of the racial Other is emphasised, this time through the analogy Oriental–Woman–Prostitute, which is precisely what Sara Suleri expresses with her apt question connected with the status of coloured women in the post-colonial discourse: 'What comes first, race, gender, or profession?' (Williams and Chrisman 1993: 249)

An item of criticism appears in connection with the newest occupant of the house, Winston Mervyn: 'The cheek of it, some West Indian grandchildren of slaves christening their son after the greatest Englishman of the century!' (*DV* 64-65). However, the words are uttered by the principal character, Arthur Johnson, the psychopath and the murderer, which is significant. Moreover, the criminal seems the most conservative character, he is even described as 'a sad and bitter anachronism' (*DV* 158), so the writer ironically pronounces even more attacking clichés and prejudices through him:

The man was as black as the taxi which he alighted, and not only black of skin and hair. He wore a black leather coat which, even from that distance, Arthur could see had cost a lot of money. To Arthur's horrified eyes, he resembled some Haitian gangster-cum-political big-wig. He had seen such character on television. (*DV* 64)

Again some comic relief is provided by adding that in vain the worried murderer would listen for voodoo drums every night. But Winston himself is aware of certain assumptions connected with his person, and even the most liberal and educated protagonist, Anthony, is subjected to his criticism in this respect: 'Because I am coloured you expect me to be uneducated and because I live here you expect me to be poor' (*DV* 89). And it is both of the Johnsons that keep 'gazing directly at the Other' (Munt 1994: 92) an appropriate phrase Munt uses in her own analysis on race politics in women's crime fiction, claiming this also incorporates a threat.

The last character of ethnic origin here, Linthea, is pictured stereotypically as an object of desire and the exotic looks of 'this tall daughter of African gods' (*DV* 61) are frequently emphasised. She evokes Ngaio Marsh's oriental cardboard characters providing either sinister, comic, or fairy-tale elements. However, the writer hardly planned Linthea to serve these purposes. None of Rendell's ethnic characters here are given much space in the story, and all of them seem to contribute to the contrast with ordinary and unambitious white London citizens. British multicultural society is illustrated in quite a provocative way: The two Jamaicans, Winston with his 'impeccable academic English' and Linthea, the practical beauty and conscientious mother, with her 'warm sun-filled West Indian' (*DV* 74) are evidently superior to most white characters with decisively a lower social status.

However, most observations are made in connection with the mentally disturbed Englishman, Arthur Johnson, the psychopathic murderer. His type of conservative Englishness is frequently stressed, for example, from the tentative information, 'he wore an immaculate dark grey suit, a white shirt, and a maroon tie dotted with tiny silver spots' (*DV* 31), through a more illuminating one, 'Arthur never shopped in the supermarkets run by Indians, in which this area of Kenbourne Vale abounded' (*DV* 11), to the final, 'as the only English people present, [...] it was their duty to present some sort of solid front [...] ' (*DV* 160). In Agatha Christie's famous novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, a similar strict Victorian upbringing of the murderer and the parallel relationship between the murderer and his 'guardian angel' can be found. Arthur's guardian angel here, Auntie Gracie, responsible

for all his regular habits and orderly behaviour, may be then regarded as another representative of the bygone English traditions. Arthur Johnson himself, always neatly dressed, never changing his orderly habits, a bit over-polite and pedantic, remains the strongest image of English conservatism and ironically, he is also the mentally disturbed murderer. Similarly, Adam Verne-Smith from *A Fatal Inversion*, representing the same mode of conservative attitude, is the one that fires the gun.

Although it is the women that are victimised in the previous two novels analysed, the stories are told from the individual males' standpoints. In *The Crocodile Bird*, a secluded female world, where men get murdered, is examined for a change. The narrative gradually reveals the traumatic experience of Eve Beck, whose father was of German origin and mother a faithful English servant at the Shrove, a spectacular country mansion. However, the immigrant or class issues are not emphasised. Eve's only daughter Liza is brought up without the knowledge of evil in the world and her identity is thus shaped by the traditional cultural and social values according to examples in literary and language studies, history and philosophy. Eve, a successful Oxford student once, stands for the mother, friend and tutor. In this way the writer explores, among other issues, the many defects of upbringing, education, institutions, and overwhelmingly patriarchal society. The representations of conservatism are shown through Eve's boyfriends, or Liza's lover, who begin to order their female partners' lives, who see them as properties and not as individuals. The Spurdells' attitude is equally conservative, based on possessions. Here Rendell's detailed description dwells on the Spurdells' Wilton carpets, the Colefax and Fowler curtains, or the Parker-Knoll armchairs, which makes a nice distinction with Liza's everyday experience, the ordinary caravan, bed and telly.

Despite the few possessions and minimum comfort, Liza had an access to the library of the big house. Again a comparison is made between the two worlds, between the past and present, the eighteenth-century works on travel and exploration, theology or history, tomes of Darwin and Lyell, or Victorian literature on the one hand and Mr Spurdell's fiction in the form of paperbacks on the other. As Liza cannot exist without books, she buys *Middlemarch*, *Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* and Aubrey's *Brief Lives* from her first pay. She can easily identify with Dorothea Brooke as she realises that 'a good many Victorian girls must have lived very much as she had, being educated at home, knowing no one but the nearest neighbours, sheltered from everything' (CB 165). She would love to read the life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning: 'When she first met Sean she had read the "Sonnets from the Portuguese" and memorised several of them ("How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.")' (CB 163). Later Mr Spurdell interrogates Liza about the contents of the books she borrows from him: 'Who was Miss Gradgrind? What did Dickens mean by Mrs Sparsit's Coriolanian nose? What did Mr Boffin collect?' (CB 252).

In *The Crocodile Bird* Rendell's dedication to the English language and literature thus constitutes another powerful theme. Liza's desire for knowledge is gradually becoming inseparable from the plot. She finds out it is not knowledge only but 'you have to have certificates and things, diplomas, degrees, before people would employ you to do things which weren't housework or putting packets on a shelf in a supermarket' (CB 334). Well-known writers and their works, prevalingly English, are scattered throughout the novel and commented on by the heroine. Interesting expressions and idioms from various areas are discussed and explained in connection with social realities in British life.

It is not my aim to present every relevant expression out of the other two novels but consideration of a few representative examples may suffice to make the general point. Even with *A Demon In My View*, where this aspect is perhaps the least conspicuous, and related to the language rather than literature, the two principal characters, the two Johnsons, are keen on expressing themselves very clearly when writing. Different registers alternate, and phrases or

idioms, such as ‘a pound of elbow grease’ (*DV* 19), are not only provided with explanations, but also give us a certain pungency. Adam’s nickname, thought out by Rufus in *A Fatal Inversion*, is ‘Adam the Wordsmith’, because he is constantly correcting everyone and consulting dictionaries. The individual entries are then cited in the text, or their meanings discussed, such as with the above mentioned ‘waif’ (*FI* 101).

In the predominantly masculine environment of *A Demon In My View* and *A Fatal Inversion*, which I have mainly examined from the standpoint of ethnicity and conservatism, various ethnic characters reveal their cultural identities through their life-styles, expectations and problems. In the former novel we encounter almost a happy symbiosis of a number of characters of different ethnic background and social standing. In the latter novel, Shiva’s dark skin also predestines him to be a threat, and therefore capable of criminal deeds, in accord with the conception of the racial Other. However, the criminals are recruited from the White English male community in these two novels. Although the main theme of *The Crocodile Bird* is sexual violence to women, other issues, such as conservative attitudes, a quest for identity and educational approaches are among the most important ones. Cultural diversity of contemporary society is set against conventional women’s roles in domestic situations, and the frequent excursions into the English language and literature promote the sense of Englishness and intensify all the issues connected with social and cultural conditions in Britain.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The paper is a shorter version of the article which is to appear in full in *Brno Studies in English*, Masaryk University, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *DV*, *CB* and *FI* are used in citations for *A Demon In My View*, *The Crocodile Bird*, and *A Fatal Inversion*, respectively.

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