

Invisibility and Hypervisibility: Interface between Race and Gender in Ruth Rendell's *Simisola*

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Abstract:

Ruth Rendell, one of the most famous British crime writers, is best known for her creation of the enduringly popular detective Chief Inspector Reginald Wexford. Her novels are profound explorations of the socio-political backdrop of crime in twentieth century Britain. Rendell's novel *Simisola* is a scathing portrayal of racism and prejudice. The present paper aims to explore the difference in the plights of black women and white women in Kingsmarkham, a fictional town in Sussex in Rendell's novels. Women of both races are ill-treated and dehumanized by a highly patriarchal society, but there is a difference. The existence of black women is completely ignored by society at large, thereby making them feel invisible in the eyes of society. The existence of white women is made precarious due to constant unwanted gaze of prying male eyes, thereby making them feel hypervisible. The novel also deplores the double oppression faced by black women because of their race and gender.

Keywords: racism, prejudice, patriarchy, male gaze, social invisibility, stereotype

Ruth Rendell's *Simisola* (1994) uncompromisingly tears apart the veneer of social complacency assumed by the residents of a town in Sussex. Rendell shows how most white people consider themselves to be free from racist mindset. They simply assume that racial discriminations are a thing of the past. *Simisola* shows that all white people in Kingsmarkham, including the protagonist Wexford, have prejudices ingrained in their psyche. The prejudices which are so widely rampant are not just racial but also patriarchal. This leads to double marginalization of black women on account of their race as well as gender. They are treated as non-existent. They mean nothing to their society. Hence they are virtually invisible in the eyes of society. White women are not entirely free from being stereotyped by patriarchal society. They are always looked upon by men as objects of sexual gratification. The novel provides ample cases of such crass commodification of white women where the men do not even realize that they are being unfair to the women. As a result, white women at any public place are invariably the objects of dehumanizing male gaze. It makes them undesirably hypervisible.

Lois Tyson has defined racism as "the unequal power relations that grow from the socio-political domination of one race by another and that result in systematic discriminatory practices" (Tyson 360). This paper demonstrates how racial domination is compounded with male hegemony in the case of black women to render them socially invisible. When the Nigerian-British doctor Akande tells Chief Inspector Wexford that his daughter Melanie

Akande is missing for the past few days, Wexford assumes that it would be very easy to locate her since there are only eighteen black people in Kingsmarkham. But the ensuing investigation proves him completely wrong. Nobody seems to have seen her. Dr Akande and his wife inform Wexford that Melanie had gone to the Job Centre for an appointment as she was looking for a job. It is from there that she has disappeared. Wexford and his team's enquiry yields disappointing results. Except for one employee of the Job Centre, all others deny having seen her. That employee, Ingrid Pamber, took no further notice of Melanie than the fact that she happened to be talking to Annette Bystock who is a good friend of Miss Pamber. She says: "I just saw her talking to Annette" (Rendell 37). Had Annette not been Pamber's close friend, it is doubtful whether Pamber would have taken any notice of Melanie. Wexford's investigation reveals that nobody on the streets paid any attention to a black girl. He is stunned to hear such negative replies from roadside shopkeepers who he knows to be observant people. What he did not know is that they observe only whites and at the most, black men. Hence he says that, ". . . she had disappeared somewhere between the Benefit Office and the bus stop" (40). If she had been white or a man, her presence would never have been so utterly ignored. Wexford is all the more surprised because this happened in broad daylight. Even the black boys who always loiter around the Job Centre or Benefit Office are clueless when asked about Melanie. When Wexford asks his colleague Michael Burden about what those vagabonds know about Melanie, he replies: "Not a thing. You could have a girl abducted on those steps by three characters from Jurassic Park and they wouldn't notice" (81). Though they are black themselves, they are openly contemptuous of black women and call them "silly old cow" (282).

While delineating pressing social issues, Rendell never takes a rose-tinted view of the world. She never attempts to disguise the grim truth in order to make it more palatable. She presents reality in all its ugliness. She does not allow even her hero Chief Inspector Wexford to go untainted by the racist blemish on his character. It is because a white man in his position would be unlikely to be free from racist prejudices. Hence Wexford is here shown to be afflicted with a racist mindset. No matter how much he brags about being liberal-minded, he is at the core racist like all other whites around him. It is exactly for this reason that he unwittingly commits an unforgivable blunder in his investigation. When he is informed that the dead body of a black girl has been found in the Framhurst Woods, he immediately assumes that it must be Melanie. He rushes off to the Akandes and confidently says: "Melanie's body has been found" (201). When Dr Akande goes for the official identification of the body, he is aghast to see that the girl is not his daughter Melanie. Mrs Akande rightly accuses Wexford of a heinous negligence:

How dare you do that to us! . . . 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? . . . One black girl's just the same as another to you, isn't she? A negress. A nigger. A darkie. . . . When you find a dead black girl it's got to be *our* girl because we're black! (208)

When Wexford realizes the intense anguish caused to the parents due to his mistake, he realizes that every accusation hurled at him by Mrs Akande is genuinely valid. Perhaps for the first time in his life, Wexford has nothing to say. He can only accept the accusations:

A salutary lesson. . . . He *had* assumed a black girl's body was that of a missing black girl and he had done so *because she was black*. The photograph he had of Melanie Akande had not been referred to. The known heights of the missing girl and the dead girl had not been compared. . . . The worst thing for him was that it had shown him he was wrong about himself. This error had occurred through prejudice, through racism, through making an assumption he could never have made if the missing girl were white and the body white. In such a case . . . he would have done a lot more rigorous research into appearance and statistics before summoning the parents to make an identification. (209-210)

It demonstrates that black women are no better than invisible beings, undistinguishable from each other in the eyes of society. Thus Rendell makes her sleuth shed all illusions about himself. The other employees of Kingsmarkham CID are also similarly deluded about themselves. When Wexford remarks that "we're all racists in this country", Inspector Michael Burden says: "I'm not. You're not" (13). The falsity of this assumption is revealed later in the novel. When Burden has to make a choice about whom to enquire of in the Job Centre, he inevitably chooses a white person: "Burden, who hotly denied that he was a racist in any degree, nevertheless rejected Osman Messaoud on the grounds of his skin colour and his name, and went up to freckled, ginger-haired Wendy Stowlap" (50). This is despite the fact that usually he prefers to ask a man rather than a woman. Their everyday conduct belies all their ostentatious attempts to treat blacks at par with whites.

When it is later revealed that the dead body belongs to someone who cannot be found in any official record, Wexford rightly deduces that the girl, Simisola, had been illegally smuggled into Britain by a white family, in violation of the Immigration Act of 1971. The Riding family had kept her locked in their house for years on end. She was actually a slave in their household. The Ridings ensured that she could never get any access to the world outside their home, thereby making her completely invisible to society. Simisola was brutally tortured and even repeatedly raped by the two men in the house, Swithun Riding and his son Christopher Riding. Angela Davis highlights the way female slaves have to suffer much more terribly than male slaves: "But women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women" (Davis 6). Christopher's sister Sophie, initially ignorant about what was going on, soon comes to know everything but tries in vain to save Simisola from the atrocities. When Wexford zeroes in on the Ridings as the culprits, Sophie willingly witnesses against her father and brother:

I didn't know what the bruises on her were . . . the bruises and cuts and all other marks. . . . I know I should have done more. I have a lot of guilt about that. Somehow, then, I knew what I'd been hiding from myself all this time, that Christopher had raped her too, over and over, there had been all the signs I pretended not to see. (Rendell 371)

It reveals the vulnerability of black women in a predominantly white society. Angela Davis says: “Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression . . .” (Davis 23). Wexford wisely argues that Simisola must have been seen at the window many times by people walking or driving on the street adjacent to the house. But since she was black, nobody ever bothered to find out about her circumstances. She remained as good as unseen, invisible. The Riding family could never have been successful in hiding a white girl in their house as a slave. They could keep Simisola hidden from the outer world only because she was black. If she had been white, she was bound to be noticed by someone through the window and must have been enquired after. Patricia Hill Collins has aptly pointed out: “Maintaining the invisibility of black women . . . not only in the United States, but in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Europe and other places where Black women now live, has been critical in maintaining social inequalities” (Collins 3).

The white women in Kingsmarkham, though not as deprived of human rights as their black sisters, are still disadvantaged as compared to men. The economic disparity between men and women is far from being levelled. Since there are a considerable fraction of white women who earn their own livelihood, the men blame these working women for the economic recession and for the widespread unemployment. Even Inspector Michael Burden, who works in Kingsmarkham CID, holds such parochial views about women. The narrator says: “Before his wife laid unto him, calling him a sexist, a chauvinist and antediluvian as well, Mike Burden had been in the habit of saying that if all these married women did not take the jobs, the unemployment figures would be halved” (Rendell 32). Such a comment is the product of the patriarchal notion that going outside the house in order to earn is the exclusive domain of men, and women must be confined within their home. This public-private binary is a patriarchal tool to consolidate economic inequality between men and women. The novel shows that even when women work in order to support their family financially, their husbands are often unappreciative of their wives’ efforts. They even resent their wives’ working outside the home. Wexford’s daughter Sylvia is a victim of such apathy and unfairness from her husband Neil. She complains: “How d’you think I feel after years of my husband telling me first that I wasn’t capable of earning and then when I was that what I earned wasn’t worth the trouble of working, it’d all go in tax” (42). Men consider earning as a masculine trait and hence do not want to share it with women. Patriarchal society has likewise decreed that emotion is a sign of weakness, and hence suited to women only. Whenever men face intense anxiety for someone they love, they pretend to be untouched by emotions in front of others, so as not to seem frail. When Dr Akande’s daughter goes missing and he reports it to Wexford, he speaks as if it were his wife who is worried and not himself. Wexford observes: “They projected their emotions on to their wives. My wife is rather anxious about it. It’s bothering my wife. . . . As strong men themselves, *macho* men, they would like you to believe they were prey to no fears, no anxieties, and to no desires either, no longings, no passions, no needs” (18). It is not that Wexford himself is immune to chauvinist prejudices. He has no objections to Dr Akande acquiring British citizenship. But he does resent the Arab woman Anouk Khoori’s British citizenship: “He wondered if he was being unreasonable, resenting her claims to Englishness while he honoured Akande’s (90).

The white women in Kingsmarkham, on the other hand, feel constantly exposed to prying male eyes. Men treat them as if their only purpose in life is to satisfy male sexual

urges. Such chauvinist outlook denigrates the basic humanity of women. The moment women step out into the public arena, they are not seen by men as persons having any professional worth. Women are most vulnerable to such male gaze at their workplace. Karen Malahyde who is an employee of Kingsmarkham CID has to face it even when she is interrogating a suspect. When Karen and Wexford arrive in Bruce Snow's office in order to interrogate him about Annette Bystock's murder, Snow is not above casting a lascivious glance at Karen: "Karen, when she was seated, couldn't help showing a lot of leg. Even in those awful brown lace-ups with their Cuban heels, her legs were spectacular. Snow gave them a swift but significant glance" (122). That Mr Snow shows such a presumptuous attitude even when he is at the brink of getting charged with a murder case, can be explained if we take into account the deep-seated patriarchal prejudices. It does not matter to men like Mr Snow that such a gaze is improper and offensive to the woman. Mr Stanton, likewise, cannot refrain from ogling the young woman working in a sandwich bar. He even makes a mental note of her attractive dress: "His eyes had wandered to the young woman assistant who now emerged from the back regions to join the man behind the counter. She was about twenty, blonde, tall, very pretty, wearing a white apron over a scoop-necked red tee-shirt and the kind of very short tube skirt that is as tight as a bandage" (154). It is evident that Stanton is taking an erotic interest in the girl. He continues to eye the girl for an uncomfortably long span of time. He gets so much absorbed in her that he has to be reminded by Inspector Burden that he is supposed to be conversing with a man: "At a cough from Burden he dragged his stare away, sighing softly" (156). Interestingly, Burden does not reprimand him for staring in an unseemly way. It shows how pervasive this habit of ogling women has become. Men do not mind if other men around them are indulging in it. They neither object to it nor protest against it. This in turn gives encouragement to those who stare at women. It somehow restricts the movement of women who have to bear it in mind that they are being constantly watched.

Another glaring instance of patriarchal demeaning of women is provided by Ruth Rendell in the form of Annette Bystock, a divorcee with no children. Mr Bruce Snow has been having an extramarital affair with Annette for nine years. For Mr Snow, the relationship was purely sexual. He admits it to Wexford during the enquiry. The novel shows how he utilized her for selfish purpose and "never gave her anything, she'd never had a present from him. He needed everything he had for his family. . . . Annette wasn't resentful, she never criticized him. She *understood*" (109). It is both astonishing and outrageous that Annette allowed him to exploit her for nine years. Even though she knew that Snow is married and has children, she let him treat her as a prostitute without payment. Wexford muses on it:

He would hardly have believed it had someone told him that here, in England, in the nineties, a man could enjoy a woman's sexual favours for years on end without paying her, without giving her presents or taking her out, without the use of a hotel room or even a bed, in his office, on the floor, so as to be within reach of his wife's voice on the phone. (215)

It is a significant social commentary. It is not just Annette who was being exploited by Snow, but also his wife Carolyn Snow. Bruce Snow is guilty of mistreating both women. He had been deluding his wife for over a decade since he had another mistress Diana Graddon before Annette. With extreme cunning and shrewdness, he had manipulated Annette and Diana in

such a way that they were both unaware of his affair with the other one. He achieved this despite the fact that Diana and Annette were friends. The narrator says: “Vine marvelled at Snow’s structure of deceit and double-dealing. . . . he could not fail to admire his chicanery. He had kept his affair with Diana a secret from Annette and his affair with Annette a secret from Diana . . .” (284). Instead of condemning Snow’s deceit, Mr Vine admires it. It is again a testimony of the chauvinist prejudices against the female gender.

Black women, on the other hand, have to struggle just to make themselves more visible to society which blatantly ignores their existence. Anouk Khoori, an Arab lady, refuses to accept this social invisibility thrust upon her. She is determined to defy the racist and patriarchal restrictions which conspire to subjugate non-white women. Hence she organizes meetings and rallies exhorting women to be on the alert against crimes such as rape and kidnappings. She even decides to stand for the Council in the by-election. Wexford’s wife Dora explains: “Oh, she’s just there because she wants to get herself in the public eye” (78). These are certainly her attempts to make herself socially visible.

The end of the novel reiterates the grim truth that though white women suffer due to patriarchal stereotypes, black women have to go through still more terrible ordeals. If white women’s worth is in question due to sexism, black women’s very identity and individuality are in question due to racism and sexism combined together. When Wexford’s team goes to the Job Centre for investigating about the identity of the dead black girl Simisola, they are met with half-hearted and even irritated responses. The white employees do not want to be bothered with enquiries about a black girl. One of them, Valerie Parker, wearily says: “I’m afraid all black people look much alike to me” (274). It marks the height of apathy of the white community towards black women. It is for this reason that Wexford had so much difficulty in locating Melanie and Simisola. Wexford never knew that society could be so completely indifferent and blind to black women: “Wexford had thought a missing black girl should be easy to find because black people were rare here, but the reverse was true. It was for that very reason that she had failed to be recognized” (305). It is apathy of society towards black women that encourages prospective criminals to proceed with their evil plots against black women. The perpetrators know for sure that they would never get caught. Probably the crime itself would never come to light. The novel thus unearths the socio-cultural reasons behind crime against black women. Lisa Kadonaga draws attention to this “shift over the past half-century from the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of detective stories to the ‘why’ of crime novels . . .” and to the “examination of the cultural and psychological conditions that make crimes and their aftereffects possible”. The novel gives the message that what happened to Simisola is the fate of innumerable black women across the globe whose plights never gets noticed by the world. The predicament of black women is, hence, much worse than that of white women. Therefore Frances Beale says: “Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the Black women’s struggle” (Beale 120). Thus the novel is a testimony of the way male hegemony and white hegemony operate to marginalize women belonging to both white and black communities in different ways.

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