

# The silent woman: the representation of sex trafficking in the contemporary British detective novel

Elizabeth Allen\*

## Abstract

The British detective novel has moved from a smug middle-class parochialism to an engagement with the global narrative of human trafficking, particularly sex trafficking. The genre has been claimed as the literary form best suited to offer a narrative of migration to counter the simplifications and xenophobia of the popular media. The global 'turn' is, however, illusory as its structures are fatally constrained by generic expectations. The narrative produced erases the complexities of migration and offers little moral challenge to the reader.

**Keywords:** British; detective fiction; sex trafficking; genre; women.

## Introduction

The detective novel, once a poor relation at the fictional feast, paid little or no attention by the quality literary press, has in recent years gained a new gravitas. The genre, it has been argued, is the novel form most appropriate to mediate the intricacies of contemporary life. European crime novels, writes Louise France are "novels with a social conscience...grappling with the issues of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Europe: people-trafficking in the Ukraine, the rights of immigrant workers in Paris sweatshops, racism in Italy" (2005). Detective novelist Ian Rankin believes that detective novels "ask their readers big questions about morality and human nature" (2008). These claims to social seriousness are perhaps not so surprising: the genre's origins in the society of the

---

\* European Business School London, Regent's College, United Kingdom.  
Email: allene@regents.ac.uk.

flâneur of the Parisian arcades (Benjamin, 1983), with its essential emphasis on the close observation of social practices, suggests a relation with Realism rather than an escapist form (Rignall, 1997). So how well founded are the claims that this hugely popular form produces a valuable representation of the complexities of the new millennium?

Certainly an examination of contemporary detective fiction has no difficulty in identifying a range of detective writers tackling the current 'big issues' including people smuggling and human trafficking. The trafficking of young women for sex indeed seems to have become a major focus in recent novels and to have superseded the last such popular theme, paedophilia, with which it has clear overlapping interests. Novelists who have adopted this narrative write from a predominantly liberal perspective and their attitude to the trafficked women is one of compassion. Given the overwhelmingly hostile media representation of immigrants (Jempson, 2007), it must surely be welcome to find some counter discourse in such a popular literary form? Yet before this can be assumed, it is necessary to examine the particular discourse of human trafficking constructed by these novels, and how this operates in the wider social discourses of migration. This paper is concerned with the representation of sex trafficking in a single genre and cannot examine fully its representation in the media, government or academic writings. It will, though, seek to identify the way in which the detective novel is in dialogue with other discourses and how its representation of trafficking may function to subvert or naturalise and legitimate these.

### **Fiction and public panic**

Formations of the detective novel, Stephen Knight claims, present and control crime in ways which are "necessary to appease disquiet." As "different realities have emerged new ideologies have been required to contain and conceal these" (2004: 105). But how can one argue that European detective narratives of trafficking, with their ever-growing numbers of victims moved across porous borders by villains motivated

by greed and unconstrained by human decency, “appease disquiet”? Do they not rather exacerbate popular fears, fuelled by certain sections of the press, that Europe will be overwhelmed by an unregulated influx of poor and desperate people from the east and south? Yet closer examination of the texts supports an argument that the very specific ways in which the trafficking phenomenon is here represented do function to allay anxiety both of fears of the hordes at our gates and of guilt at the pressures that motivate their flight. “Cultural productions appear to deal with real problems but are in fact conceived and resolvable in terms of the ideology of the culture group dominant in society” says Knight (2004: 9). I shall argue that the detective narrative here offers a way that, while it may not offer resolution of a problem, at least offers consolation to the liberal western reader who is part of the dominant cultural formation. How, while representing human exploitation on a factory scale, is this achieved?

### **The widening perspective**

Clearly trafficking as a topic generates a very different narrative to that of the traditional detective novel with its tightly defined possibilities in terms of location, motive and outcome. The founding text for the detective narrative, usually identified as Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, has its victims discovered in a seemingly inaccessible room: while later novels resist such spatial austerity, the sense of enclosure is characteristic. The so-called ‘cosies’ of writers such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Ngaio Marsh offered, if not a closed room, then at least a closed society, a group of suspects well known to each other through blood or propinquity. Even when Christie moves her murderous impulses from the country village vicarage or the country house library to such exotic locations as the Orient Express, and the Nile, she retains a short-list of suspects and a motive that lies not in their brightly lit present but in the dim, murky corners of past relationships. This ‘whodunit’, Todorov explains, in ‘The Typology of Detective Fiction’, is highly regulated: “Detective fiction has its norms; to ‘de-

## THE SILENT WOMAN

velop' them is to disappoint them ... The whodunit par excellence is not the one which transgresses the rules of the genre, but the one which conforms to them" (1977: 43). And in order to conform to genre requirements, it was necessary, as Raymond Williams points out, to suppress "the full and connected analysis of any more general understanding". The characters exist only in an "isolated assembly" of "immediate and transient relations" and the "abstract mode of detection" employed in these novels silently erases any possibility of registering or understanding their real social relations (1973: 299). The detective novel of the new millennium, moving across state borders and the, now less rigorously policed, borderlands of moral ambiguity, reads as a very different species from the 'cosies', with their ethnically homogenous casts of monolingual middle and upper-class people marooned in isolated country houses or locked Oxford colleges. Now characters polyglot and rainbow-hued move from Eastern Europe, China and South America to the mean streets of London, Edinburgh and Manchester and into quiet English country towns. Yet, counter-intuitive as it may seem, Williams's attack on the enclosed country house novels of Christie or Sayers, remains eerily pertinent to the globalised narrative of mobility. In the construction of the 'trafficking narrative', the totality of human relations remains unacknowledged and 'the real social relations' are still erased. "Trafficking" writes Gilbert (2007), is "not a migration issue but a human rights issue." This is precisely the way in which it is constructed in the novels but, I shall argue, their prevailing rhetoric of rights and slavery erases a more crucial migration narrative, taming and domesticating its complexities into a traditional binary narrative of criminals and victims. The real narrative – and moral challenge – is refused.

### **Migration narrative as continuum**

There is a fundamental disjunction between this binary model and the continuum model found in specialist migration literature. Paolo Monzini writes of "an exploitation scale" (2005: 39), Joao Peixoto of a "continuum of extremely

dynamic situations” (2006). The “migration industry”, state Castles and Miller, does involve “unscrupulous criminals” but these exist at one end of a scale, while at the other are found “members of a migrant community helping their compatriots on a voluntary basis” (2003: 114). There is a consensus that “there are no clear statistics on numbers trafficked” and that “there is a tendency to accept unverified statistics and data without further interrogation” (Karpur, 2005: 29). It is not this discourse with which detective novels are in dialogue, but rather with the more flamboyant narrative offered in the popular media: “Newspaper stories created by visiting journalists or case studies collected from a handful of ‘rescued’ girls are commonly seized upon as ‘the facts’” (Kempadoo, 2005: xx). This narrative maps easily onto the generic conventions of the detective novel, ironing out political ambiguities and complexities and, crucially, functions to situate migration firmly within a discourse of criminality.

For this narrative to operate effectively, it is important that the trafficked woman be situated as ‘pure’ victim with a consequent denial of agency. Many writers and activists in the ‘migration industry’ strongly contest this emphasis. This argument is made powerfully by Laura Maria Agustin’s *Sex at the Margins* (2007) reviewed in the *New Statesman* under the title ‘The Myth of Trafficking’ (O’Neill, 2008). Her case, based on extensive work with migrant women sex workers, intersects with the argument of British writer Hilary Kinnell (2002), who understands anti-sex trafficking campaigners as collusive, consciously or otherwise, in a conspiracy to deny legitimacy to prostitution in any form. Other writers have drawn attention to the way in which campaigning and funding has focussed on the sex trade and excluded other forms of human trafficking (Skinner, 2008: 75ff, 141). The women she has met, argues Agustin are agents, but while “first world travellers are imagined to be modern individuals searching for ways to realise themselves”, migrants are perceived as “acted upon [by solely economic factors] leaving little room, for desire, aspiration, anxiety or other states of the soul” (2008: 43).

**Migration novel as binary**

The detective novel certainly constructs the trafficked woman as 'victim' without agency. She may be extremely young, perhaps abducted on her way to school (Hall, 2007: 138) or, if rather older, seduced by declarations of undying love from a plausible man who, having lured her to western Europe, sells or pimps her (Leon 1995: 209). Innocence and family links are routinely emphasised. Karina, the young Bosnian prostitute in Ian Rankin's *The Hanging Garden* (1999: 86) closely resembles the detective's daughter, and, like a number of the other victims, has a child at home for whose upbringing she sends money (see also Leon, 1995: 208). Passivity is enhanced by silence. While the silence of death is a detective standard, the silence of those women not killed in the opening episode is enforced by a failure to communicate directly. The opening pages may offer a lorry load of "broken forms" like "those plastic women they dress up and put in the windows of shops" nameless in the snow of an Italian hillside (Leon, 1995: 3), or a badly beaten Nigerian girl mourning her past life "full of the smell of cooking...people relaxed on their verandas", who is at once silenced as her persecutors drop her into the icy waters of a Yorkshire canal (Hall, 2007: 10-11). Although in this novel Elena, another young trafficking victim, escapes, her account of her abduction and abuse is doubly mediated for the reader, first through an interpreter of whom his daughter remarks: "I bet my dad left out the worst bits when he translated" (2007: 200) and then by other characters who claim to be passing on details of Elena's narrative unavailable directly to the reader. In Rankin's Edinburgh the only man capable of translating Karina's narrative cannot cope with the vocabulary of commercial sex, complaining that he is "more used to literature and film" and that, although a linguist he is "no expert on colloquialisms" (2007: 43-44). Cath Staincliffe's *Hit and Run* (2007) is unusual in that one woman is granted agency through an extended narrative presence. Marta made a decision to leave Poland because "there's always a chance that

there's something better here" (2007: 176). She has "dreams" but "from the start" has understood that the promise of a job as a dancer "was a euphemism" (2007: 50). This exercise of choice and weary worldliness is highly unusual as it threatens to undermine the black/white binary.

Those members of immigrant communities offering assistance to those who cannot access legal means of migration, to whom Castles and Miller refer, are absent from this narrative, as indeed for the most part is the demand side of the trade, the clients. The 'carriers', motivated only by greed represent the Other in a 'pure' form. The origin of this figure of horror is most frequently the Balkans or Eastern Europe, with occasional Turks or Chechens (see Bannister 2007; Billingham 2004; Harvey, 2008; Nadel, 2004; Leon 1995). Jo Bannister's *Flawed* (2007) offers a particularly strong example of the insistence on 'Othering' the criminal: he is contrasted with Walsh, who, constructed as a 'lovable rogue' with a strong sense of British fair play, has meted out appropriate - and fatal - punishment. Significantly, the villain's origins are dealt with in a cavalier fashion, variously labelled as a "Greek godfather", and by Walsh as "some kind of Eurothug" (2007: 142) and, repeatedly as a "nasty little Serb" (2007: 298-300) who has tried to import the methods and principles of an alien place: "Apparently that kind of talk goes down well in the Balkans" (2007: 300). Again, Staincliffe (2007) goes some way to break this pattern. Her detective, Janine, recognises that the "image" she has constructed of Sulikov, the Polish trafficker with his "balding head and perhaps a scar" is a cliché generated from old war films (2007: 170). But the reader then discovers Sulikov to be an alternative identity for one of the English characters, suggesting that Staincliffe is uncomfortable with the compulsive need to prevent any recognition of Self in the alien Other (2007: 225). The moral structure more standard in these novels, however, maps directly onto what Kempadoo calls the "xenophobic, racist agenda" of "the dominant anti-trafficking paradigm" (2005: xviii).

### Conclusion

That, despite apparent fundamental changes in subject matter, detective novels continue to operate according to their generic conventions, and that this necessarily limits the claims made for them to be 'the New Realism', is not so surprising. The genuine indignation of these writers is fed directly by press reports which themselves reproduce the binary narrative and rely on questionable statistics. Patricia Hall writes in a personal communication to the author of the paper (November 2007): "the specific issues that I explore come more or less straight from newspapers - it's all there, as contemporary as I can make it." Simon Lewis, explaining the motivations for his novel *Bad Traffic*, believes that "the majority of women who work in prostitution have been trafficked" (Lewis, 2008). Theirs is a simple, if dreadful, story of the Bogeyman and the woman who must be rescued. It is a story which by effectively conflating the abuse of human trafficking with migration and mobility places the latter within a discourse of criminality. It refuses the risky move into political and moral territory "beyond the victim/slave-master polarity" to a place where one 'insert(s) the problem into a broader framework of international migration, organised crime, gender issues and the 'global' sex market" (Monzini, 2005: 3). While some texts do query the justice of specifics of the system, such as the way in which the 'child' victims, rather than their clients are criminalised (Hall, 2007: 232), the 'trafficking narrative' invites no interrogation of "how (the) ecological, cultural, economic, political and social conditions" which promote migration are produced (Harvey, 1996: 5). Here is no encouragement for readers to recognise that their position on this differential scale could cast them in the role not of compassionate observers of the traditional story, but rather as "perpetrators" of villainy in a new story (Bauman, 2006: 98). We need not recognise ourselves as players in this game as long as we can shudder at the absolute villainy of that "nasty little Serb."



## References

- Agustin, L. M., 2007, *Sex at the Margins*, London: Zed Books.
- Bannister, J., 2007, *Flawed*, London: Allison and Busby.
- Bauman, Z., 2006, *Liquid Fear*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Benjamin, W., 1983, *Charles Baudelaire: a Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, (translated by Harry Zohn), London and New York: Verso.
- Billingham, M., 2004, *The Burning Girl*, London: Time Warner.
- France, L., 2005, "Murder They Wrote", *Observer Review*, 6, 12 June 2005.
- Gilbert, S., 2007, "Social Justice is More Important than Sorrow", The Centre for Social Justice, Writers' Forum on Sex Trafficking. <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk>, Accessed 23 September 2007.
- Hall, P., 2007, *Death in a Far Country*, London: Allison and Busby.
- Harvey, D., 1996, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harvey, J., 2008, *Cold in Hand*, London: Heinemann.
- Jempson, M., 2007, "Portrayal and Participation of Minorities in the Media" paper presented at *INCORE Race and Media Conference*, 3 October 2007.
- Kempadoo, K., 2005, "From Moral Panic to Social Justice". In Kempadoo (ed.) *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered*, London: Paradigm.
- Kapur, R., 2005, "Cross-border Movements and the Law: Renegotiating the Boundaries of Difference" 25-41 in Kempadoo, *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered*, London: Paradigm.
- Kinnell, H., 2002, "Why Feminists Should Rethink on Sex Workers Rights." <http://www.nswp.org/pdf/kinnell-feminists>, Accessed 16 February 2008.
- Knight, S., 2004, *Crime Fiction 1800-2000*, London: Macmillan.
- Leon, D., 1995, *A Venetian Reckoning*, London: Macmillan.
- Lewis, S., 2008, *Bad Traffic*, <http://www.crimeontime.co.uk/mag/index.php/showarticle/734>
- Monzoni, P., 2005, *Sex Traffic: Prostitution, Crime and Exploitation* (translated by Patrick Camiller), London: Zed Books.
- Nadel, B., 2004, *Petrified*, London: Headline.
- O'Neill, B., 2008, "The myth of trafficking," *New Statesman*, 54-55, 31 March 2008.

## THE SILENT WOMAN

- Peixoto, J., 2006, "Migrants trafficking and individual strategies: the formation of dynamic channels in international migration," *Migration Letters*, 3(1): 1-9.
- Rankin, I., 1999, *The Hanging Garden*, London: Orion.
- Rankin, I., 2008, "The birth of the detective," *Guardian Review*, 7, 12 April 2008.
- Rignall, J., 1997, *Realist Fiction and the Strolling Spectator*, London: Routledge.
- Skinner, E.B., 2008, *A Crime so Monstrous*, Edinburgh and London: Mainstream.
- Staincliffe, C., 2007, *Hit and Run*, London: Allison and Busby.
- Todorov, T., 1977, "The Typology of Detective Fiction," *The Poetics of Prose* Oxford: Blackwell, 42-52.
- Williams, R., 1973, *The Country and the City*, London: Chatto and Windus.