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Unravelling Unpersons: Inscribing the Voices of Contemporary Slavery in the UK

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Pietro Deandrea

Unravelling Unpersons: Inscribing the Voices of Contemporary Slavery in the UK

The UN has updated definitions of slavery to take into account its present-day forms [in 1982 ...]:

-) slavery is any form of dealing with human beings leading to the forced exploitation of their labour.

-) slavery is any institution or practice which, by restricting the freedom of the individual, is susceptible of causing severe hardships and serious deprivation of liberty.

(Anderson 1993: 11)

Introduction

In a world context where the number of new slaves is estimated between 12.3 and 27 millions (amounting to \$ 32 billion of yearly illicit profits; Craig *et al.* 2007: 20-21, 17), the number of enslaved migrants living in the UK is nowadays estimated at around 25,000 (Gupta 2007: 2). They are trafficked people of various sorts, such as sexual slaves, cockle-pickers, agricultural or factory labourers, and domestic servants. They constitute the lowest sector of British society, not least because their isolated existence is still largely undocumented. Modern slavery is “illegal, dynamic, internationalised and, because of these characteristics, difficult to map”; its figures are unreliable, “a problem that both the police and Home Office acknowledge” (Craig *et al.* 2007: 10, 21). “Refugees”, Zygmunt Bauman (2004: 80) writes, “the human waste of the global frontier-land, are the ‘outsiders incarnate’, the absolute outsiders.” His definition might apply to these new slaves, but only partly: their hidden existence renders them barely “incarnate” - rather, they are frequently described as phantoms, or, as Gupta (2007: 3) says, “non-person, or an ‘un-person’”.

This essay deals with some books which attempt to bestow flesh and blood on these ghostly lives. Before institutionalizing their voices through writing, all the authors examined here express their difficulties in locating them and making them speak, in overcoming the stumbling block of their spectralized nature which in some cases occupies the centre of the volumes. These pages also analyze the techniques employed to inscribe these unearthed voices in order to restore their humanity and

convey their urgency, while reflecting on the redemptive role that writing and written language are sometimes invested with by the victims themselves.

This essay attempts to identify similarities and differences among three sociological reports and two fictional texts by making reference to critical tenets pertaining to postcolonial studies. Its wider theoretical frame inevitably interacts with the debated questions regarding the possibilities and modalities for the subaltern to speak: “such questions are not unique to the study of colonialism but are also crucial for any scholarship concerned with recovering the histories and perspectives of marginalised people” (Loomba 1998: 231).

Furthermore, in its focus on enslaved *women* it points to one specific example of the colonial legacy identified by Loomba (1998: 230), whereby “third world women and women of colour remain the most exploited of the world’s workers today. [...] if there is a ‘Sisyphus Stratum’ [...], then women from once colonised countries or peoples form a major part of that stratum.”

Investigative Books

Non-fictional literature on present-day slavery is far from being established in the formal academic sector, being mostly produced by human rights practitioners and investigative journalists (Craig et al 2007: 24, 31). Bridget Anderson’s *Britain’s Secret Slaves* was a pioneer text in denouncing the phenomenon. It focuses on the field of domestic workers: “the new slave-holders are the masters and mistresses of overseas domestic workers who have brought their domestic staff with them into this country” (1993: 11). Anderson emphasizes that these forms of exploitation, leading to an appalling number of psychological, physical and sexual abuses, are, incredibly, “sanctioned by government” (11), due to a policy that considers immigrant domestic workers of wealthy families as members of their employers’ household. Their entry is stamped onto their employer’s passport (42-46; the law was modified in 1998), and therefore they find themselves literally jailed in private houses, at the complete mercy of the householders’ cruel whims. In many cases, this implies total isolation from any form of human contact, often worsened by an imperfect linguistic competence. For this reason, and being written at a time when awareness of the facts was quite dim, the book alludes to the ghostly nature of

these new slaves by claiming a general inability to state their numbers: official figures are few and “grossly inaccurate” (42).

One major implication is a first stumbling block which is to be situated *before* the passage from the oral to the scripted form of their experiences: their voices have first to be found, discovered by a sympathetic ear, unearthed from layers of suffering and numbing affective deprivation. Anderson (1993: 57) clearly demonstrates the importance of facing this first obstacle: according to her, the first efforts by the Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers to bring some victims together to discuss their ordeal helped them to grasp the size of the issue, to set up support interventions, and to create a friendly, trusting atmosphere. In one woman’s words:

I went back to normal. Before, when I was alone, I didn't trust anyone. My experience with my employers meant that I couldn't speak up. It makes you silent and not open. When I began to talk to people in similar situations, and I saw that I was not alone, I realised that the problem was not just to do with me, that it was the Philippines and Britain and the government in those countries.

Anderson (1993: 58) identifies in that emotional recovery a link with urgent, practical matters:

This sympathy and understanding is crucial in rebuilding the self-respect of women who have been systematically degraded and treated as less than human. It is a process which in turn enables those women to help others [...] a breathing space, time to recover from their trauma, and importantly, the possibility of making a decision on their next step, informed by sound legal advice.

Throughout the book, the victims’ voices are interspersed in two ways. The first is exemplified in the quotation above, where Anderson’s socio-economic analysis is given flesh and blood through a first-person narration printed in italics. This mode of presentation, however, is not exclusive to the victim’s voices, because italics are also employed to quote articles and other sources. Her second method is the narration (in first or third person, sometimes both) of a case history written in bold type on a framed grey background; these passages are further set off from the main text by their titles, which follow a Victim’s first name + “Story” pattern, such as “Roseline’s Story” (43). It should be noticed that this second technique of conveying their voices is sometimes less directly linked with the issue tackled by Anderson in the surrounding pages, and thus acquires prominence by its own force.

Even though Anderson's research focuses on the UK, nearly one-third of it is dedicated to the analysis of international migrations – discussing a phenomenon like this inevitably calls for a global perspective which should take into account both the obnoxious effects of economic globalization and the extreme flexibility of the British market (Craig *et al.* 2007: 24, 27, 33). The same goes for two recent publications, Louisa Waugh's *Selling Olga* (2006) and Rahila Gupta's *Enslaved* (2007). Waugh's volume is structured precisely on her international investigations into the roots of some forms of contemporary slavery (mostly sex slaves), which took her to Moldova, Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, and Italy. The geographical thread of *Selling Olga* is compounded with her feelings, thoughts, travels, and interviews with a good number of people involved. Her meetings with NGO workers and police officers certainly help readers understand the complexity of the 'trade', but the most striking difference from *Britain's Secret Slaves* is the prominence given to the victims' voices – a feature shared with Gupta's book, and more relevant to the scope of the present essay. Neither Waugh nor Gupta quotes these voices as detached interpolations which simply exemplify the observations of the text. The first-hand accounts are pushed to the forefront, assuming a fundamental role in their books, thus conveying a sense of human suffering which represents a step further from the renditions of sociological reports. They are likely to touch readers, and to lead them experience the tragedy lying behind the narrations.

To this end, these ghostly humans are given flesh and blood by Waugh and Gupta's stylistic choices of presentation. First of all, both authors take great care in reconstructing the context of their interviewees: a socio-economic and historical depiction of their country of origin, their personal and family background, and the practicalities surrounding their meeting, such as having to sign "a confidentiality waiver, agreeing not to publish anything that will personally identify my interviewee" for safety reasons (Waugh 2006: 15). Waugh and Gupta seem intent on noting the corporeal expressiveness associated with these voices, in an effort to carry the full impact of their oral testimonies. Annette is a young African who "looks very young, and her clenched body language spells out reticence and resignation", and who speaks "avoiding any eye contact" (Waugh 2006: 44). Gupta (2007: 61-62) similarly describes Natasha: "*She does not make eye contact except fleetingly – she says it is a habit she developed when working as a prostitute. She hated the clients so much she never looked at them and now*

she has trouble looking anyone in the eye.” Subtle vocal nuances, too, are registered: when Naomi recalls her homeless days in Sierra Leone, Gupta’s observation in italics (116) provides a fuller picture: “Maybe somebody will leave food on their plate. I will take it and eat (*She says the word ‘eat’ with real passion.*)”. This tactful attention to the fragility of their interviewees calls for a substantial presence on the authors’ part – a remarkable difference from Anderson’s approach. Gupta (109) records her own doubts concerning her questions to illiterate Naomi (“*But it suddenly occurs to me that perhaps she cannot read or write. I stop myself.*”) and consequently helps her calculate the dates and periods of her life (117, 121). The human bond between interviewer and interviewee sometimes involves translators (see Gupta 61, 68) and/or other people present, such as social workers, thus creating a less tense atmosphere which is more conducive to free talking:

“ ‘Yes! I bet you were!’, ‘*Pravda!*’, ‘How dare he, the bastard!’ All four of us are suddenly shouting, gesturing, and laughing out loud together, like four women anywhere sharing an outrage between them. The painful tension in the room ruptures. [...] It feels bizarre to laugh at this, but it is a tremendous relief for all of us. It is as though between us we have finally jeered at this bar-owning pimp with no name. Olga sits back in her chair, stretches and exhales, and for a moment her face looks almost serene. Then she takes us all by surprise by suddenly recalling a local Kosovan who used to [visit her...] quite regularly just to chat her up” (Waugh 2006: 23).

The above quotation suggests another important feature of these narrations: they are sometimes transcribed as they were delivered, i.e. without respecting a strict chronological order, especially in Gupta’s *Enslaved*. For instance, when the Russian Natasha is being driven from Frankfurt to Brussels and is finally told that she is expected to work as a prostitute, she recalls her shock and her thoughts of escape, immediately starting a ten-page-long digression on her childhood escapes and her problematic family (Gupta 2007: 67-77). Thanks to its free-flowing progress, her narration depicts the complexity of a full picture by connecting past with present, Russia with Western Europe, family alcoholism and beatings with her escape toward exploitation. Apart from a short introduction and two concluding chapters where the phenomenon is analysed, Gupta’s book is structured on five case histories (one for each chapter) reporting the victims’ narrations of their trials. In each chapter, Gupta’s italics are limited to providing an opening context and interspersing the main narrations with clarifying digressions on several issues like current immigration laws or the narrator’s

emotional state and body language. In its centring of these voices, the main chapters of Gupta's volume acquire a more fictional nature, partly because readers are spared no crude detail about abuses like female genital mutilation or rapes. The journalistic-investigation plot of *Selling Olga* seems to invite more controlled narrations. Nevertheless, Waugh's perceptiveness emphasizes a connection between traumatic memories and non-chronological narrative development. When the Moldovan Anna describes her trials in Bosnia as "a bad dream", Waugh (2006: 33) writes:

She seems to enter an almost hypnotic state of shock as she moves her story back and forth between countries, colouring in details seemingly at random, honing in on particular awful moments and then leaping towards the next crisis [...]. It is impossible to track the sequence of events, and after a while [...] I realise that I am missing the point. This chaos is Anna's story. She sounds as though she is reliving individual moments that then ignite other memories and hurtle her off on a tangent.¹

In Waugh's and Gupta's volumes, the victims' attitude towards their own narratives appears to swing between two extremes. On one hand, one might detect a hint at the therapeutic value of 'speaking it out', already present in Anderson's book; one case in point might be Olga's fleeting serenity mentioned above. On the other hand, and more evidently, researchers inevitably stumble on the difficulty of finding willing testimonies. Anna's halting start exemplifies both feelings:

Natasha [the translator] and I sit opposite Anna, who begins to speak and tremble at the same moment. She also begins to weep quietly, wiping her eyes with her trembling hands as she resolutely continues. "Anna, we don't need to do this," I say to her. But she shakes her head and turns towards Natasha. "I want to tell you," she says. "This is my story, and I want to tell you." She begins again at the beginning, breaks down once more and then repeats, "I want to tell you my story." And on this third attempt when she launches herself into her story, it seems as though she is suddenly almost in a rush to expel it, like a toxin. (Waugh 2006: 30)

Before the passage from oral to written presence, then, one must acknowledge a preceding step – the wall of silence surrounding the exploited victims: "I'm uncomfortably aware that everything I've heard about the UK sex industry so far has been second-hand information, as opposed to first person"

¹ In this regard, one should also consider the inherently digressive nature of oral literatures (Okpewho 1992: 96-97).

(Waugh 2006: 142). This wall is a mixture of embarrassment, shame, pain in reliving one's trauma, fear of reprisals. At rending moments of recollection, it reappears in telling silences and elusions that the authors respect: "*Naomi goes into a long and deep silence*" (Gupta 2007: 125); "it is the things that she does not talk about that become more and more apparent to me, until the air in the room feels heavy. [...] Annette's experience has been almost unspeakable, and it seems in many ways as though much of it still is" (Waugh 2006: 147). In some cases, this barrier is made more formidable by linguistic problems, which might require a translator's help. Gupta (2007: 111) makes an effort at reproducing non-standard Englishes, too: pregnant Naomi from Sierra Leone says about her child: "When he grow up, I will be there strong to tell him the history of what happened." Naomi's illiteracy is an extreme case which exemplifies the link between linguistic difficulties and an increased sense of isolation and vulnerability in the UK context, a sense which "create[s] barriers to them accessing knowledge about their rights or where to go to" (Craig *et al.* 2007: 17). Naomi cannot read signboards, mail, nor official documents regarding her status: in a written-culture-based country, she is often too scared to ask for help, and cannot develop any sense of independence and self-dignity: she "has developed a habit of not asking questions because she feels, as a result of her experiences, that it is not her place to do so. In the most simple ways, this impacts on her life and her ability to take control of it" (Gupta 2007: 126). Her recollections and daily movements are impaired by this, because she lacks concrete data (117). On the other hand, she expresses an encouraging wish to learn: "When you go to school, you learn to ask questions. Before I do something, I want to know why and what is that?" (134). The role of education as a way to repossess one's life is even more prominent in other interviewed victims, whose college attendance is seen as a hopeful sign of future integration, as in the cases of Somali Farhia (Gupta 2007: 43, 47, 59) and Russian Natasha (106).

In spite of all the related problems, Waugh and Gupta's most obvious aim is to raise public awareness and ignite counteractions to this relatively new and unknown phenomenon; they could be likened to the ambivalent attitude which Loomba (1998: 234) identifies in Gayatri Spivak: "a philosophical scepticism about recovering any subaltern agency with a political commitment to making visible the position of the marginalised." Furthermore, these transcribed examples of oral history present themselves as valid alternatives to the coldly

bureaucratic reports and their supposed objectivity. When Farhia Nur's application for asylum is rejected, Gupta (2007: 48-49) comments that

Much of the judgement deals with the issue of credibility. It is easy to see why parts of Farhia's story may sound implausible without the detail to flesh it out and the nuances that get lost in translation [...] without the benefit of a fuller narrative. [...] These reports have come in for extensive criticism for the partial and often misleading way in which they quote from source material in order to support a particular view. Unfortunately for people like Farhia, [...] tribunals rely heavily on them.

Once more, some theoretical underpinnings for the present study seem to be offered by postcolonial scholars, for whom "the reclamation of oral histories has been an important aspect [...] for the retrieval of occluded subaltern experience" (Thieme 2003: 198).

Fiction

Albeit still scanty, fictional literature on new British slavery is, generically speaking, multifarious. The present essay focuses on a novel by the queen of crime fiction and a lyrical novella by a Nigerian author. Ruth Rendell's *Simisola* was published shortly after *Britain's Secret Slaves*, and explicitly acknowledges its debt to Anderson's book. It marks a change in Rendell's output, setting its sleuth Wexford investigating into multicultural England and into its complex web of prejudices, class stratifications, and political correctness: as the author says, "a deliberate and new direction, [...] the first of the consciously 'political Wexfords'" (Rowland 2001: 193). The plot revolves around the battered corpse of a young Nigerian woman, an enslaved domestic worker brought into the country by a respectable family of returned Britons, former expatriates in Kuwait. What is eventually discovered comes from the confession of her master's repentant daughter, who has never been interested enough in knowing and treating that servant as a human being; therefore, Wexford's detective work unveils the nature of the respectable culprits, but is quite powerless about the victim's identity. Her illiteracy cut her off from her surroundings, thus echoing Naomi's isolation, described by Gupta above. Her voice is never heard, not even in flashbacks, and is reported only once, by another Yoruba migrant she casually meets in an attempt to run away from her prison-like 'home'. Her identity is enveloped in almost total darkness: she

represents a gaping void at the centre of this novel, that cannot be filled. She is history-less, voiceless, ghostly – a phantom unknowable to any investigation, who fictionally embodies the wall of silence and the voicelessness that Anderson, Waugh, and Gupta have to overcome.

In Rendell's story, the overcoming of this dehumanization is glimpsed only occasionally, through some textual and structural knots. In his generous but helpless effort to humanize the victim, Wexford can only give her a name. During his investigation he names her "Sojourner" after Sojourner Truth (1797?-1883), the American escaped slave and abolitionist.² Names play a primary role, too, in the volumes on British new slavery mentioned above. As seen above, Anderson would use them as titles of her framed case histories. At the beginning of their interviews, Waugh (2006: 15, 145, 160) and Gupta (2007: 9, 61) must often see if they can use the victims' real names or must have recourse to pseudonyms. The role of names in their cases can imply a humanizing drive similar to Wexford's, or a way to maintain a protective anonymity – in Naomi, who is pregnant, both options seem valid:

Renaming herself becomes wish-fulfilment, as if another name would magically whisk her to another life. When [...] I discover how utterly alone she is in this world, I ask her why she wants to be anonymous. "[...] What if I go ahead with my life and one day my baby buys the book? It might be that when I have the baby, I won't tell him how he came." (Gupta 2007: 110)

As for Sojourner's real name, Rendell discloses it only at the very end of the novel, which is concluded by Wexford's words to his fellow pub-drinkers (Rendell 1994: 377): "If she ever had a surname no one seems to remember it. Sophie [the repentant daughter] never forgot the first name she gave them when she was handed over [...], but the others had forgotten it. She was called Simisola.' He got up. 'Shall we go?'" This curious ending inspired the following reflection:

By way of a reader-response-like observation, one could notice how the book's title comes up only in its last sentence: how many readers had forgotten about it while reading, possibly accepting 'Sojourner' as a name, albeit unconsciously? Could this represent a crafty way to trigger off some sort of awareness in readers, about how (racially) careless one can be about someone else's life? (Deandrea 2009: 411)

² According to Bianca Del Villano's analysis of the recurrent figure of the ghost in anglophone literatures, in Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* the need to name can be seen as an ethical necessity to confer life on the slaves' denied identity (2007: 21).

Rendell's new direction, then, leads to her creating a plot where the solution is bitterly incomplete, by the standards of canonical crime fiction: by purposely leaving the central character's voice and identity unrevealed and thus opening a disquieting void at the centre of the book, *Simisola* conveys one obscure, ghostly side of late 20th-century Britain.

As in Rendell, the second fictional example considered here significantly bears its central character's name in the title. In this case the suffering involved in her negated identity is unravelled lyrically, in all its shades. Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* traces the thoughts of its 14-year-old protagonist in the third person. The book alternates "Now" chapters, where Abigail sits near the sphinxes and Cleopatra's Needle by the Thames meditating on her life, and "Then" chapters, where events from her past are approached directly; all in all, the protagonist's thoughts (mixing pain, loss, and melancholy) dominate the narration without much chronological order, where "she wasn't always able to tell how much she was inventing and how much was real" (Abani 2006: 40), thus echoing Waugh's words about the shocking experiences behind her interviewee's chaotic narration.

In order to reconstruct her tragedy, Abani blends socio-political, gender, and personal factors. Nigeria is a country "where the dead littered the streets of big towns and cities like so much garbage" (55) – a description very close to Bauman's analogy between rubbish and wasted lives. In a way, Abani could here be seen as the fictional equivalent of Anderson, Waugh, and Gupta's effort to trace the global roots of contemporary slavery in the UK.

Abigail's identity has always been marked by absence. Her mother died in giving birth to her; the book opens with her suggestive memories of her mother's burial: "Even this. This memory like all the others was a lie" (Abani 2006: 17). Abigail had to live with a father who never ceased to mourn his wife's loss; an affectionate man, but carrying the "shadows under the smiling eyes that said over and over – you killed her. You. Why her? I loved her" (44). On one hand, Abigail is caught in her painful loss, leaving her thirsty for detailed stories about her mother: "it was hard to do anything but try to fill the [her mother's] hollowed-out shape"; on the other hand, there inevitably comes an ensuing inability to shape an autonomous personality for herself, to move away from a deceased woman who bore the same name: "She was more ghost than her mother, however, moving with the quality of light breathing through a house in which the only footprints in the dust were those of her

dead mother. [...] She tried to talk to her father about this need to see herself [...] She couldn't be the ghost he wanted her to be" (44, 45).

Abigail's ghostly identity is also shaped by her relationships with men, who had never really "seen her" (26). Abani conveys this through a metaphor reminiscent of the female-body-as-conquered-land' trope (Loomba 1998: 151-2), thus fusing the personal, gender and political roots of Abigail's exploitation: "She was a foreign country to them. One they wanted to pass through as quickly as possible [...]. And though there had only been a few men, sometimes she felt like there had been whole hordes" (Abani 2006: 27). Her reaction towards men is similar, calling to mind the victims interviewed above who avoided eye-contact.

With the consent of her father, who will hang himself shortly before her departure, she is taken to London by their relative Peter, thanks, as will later be discovered, to forged documents. She becomes one of the thousands of trafficked West African minors, a wide-scale plague within that area from the 1990s (Dottridge 2002: 39) which is presumably connected with the mysteriously unknown whereabouts of many African children in the UK (Left 2005). She resists a first rape attempt meant to prostitute her, but cannot do anything against the violence of Peter, who chains and harnesses her to the doghouse in his yard ("You want to bite like a dog? I'll treat you like a dog", Abani 2006: 89), leaving her in the freezing weather for days. After being made a ghost in more than one way, Abigail is further degraded through this animalization; something of this sort is already present in the books examined above, where the dehumanizing experience undergone by the victims is often described through hints, direct references or imagery related to animal conditions: in Bexleyheath, Helen "was forced to sleep outside the back door, even in winter, and was dressed only in rags. Her food consisted mainly of unripe apples and pears from the garden" (Anderson 1993: 55); a group of Greek migrants on a daffodil farm in Cornwall were given cans of dog food to eat (Waugh 2006: 90); Gupta (2007: 4) describes the ignored existence of such people thus: "They no more scratch at our consciousness than rats living below the floorboards, reminding us of their existence by their occasional scratching noises and their footprints in our flour"; Rendell's Inspector Wexford says (1994: 373) of Simisola's respectable gaoler's wife: "She let her sleep on a mattress on the floor in the 'dog's room' because she's that sort of woman, the kind that used to talk about the poor keeping coal in the bath if you gave them bathrooms."

Abani's Abigail seems to incarnate this degrading process to its extremes: she is spat on, pee'd over, fed with rotten food and rancid water if not urine, repeatedly raped into submission (Abani 2006: 89-93). Or, at least, that would be Peter's aim, because at some point Abigail attacks him exactly as if she were a dog, and wins her own freedom: "Fifteen days, passing in the silence of snow. And she no longer fought when Peter mounted her. *Wrote* his shame and anger in her. Until. The slime of it threatened to obliterate *the tattoos that made her*. Abigail" (95, italics mine). This shows the decisive factor behind her reaction, linked to a crucial element in her search for an identity. In various ways, Abigail has used her body as a writable surface since she was a child. First lightly, as a way to recapture her mother: "Sated [with stories about her mother], she traced their outlines on her skin with soft fingers, burning them in with the heat of her loss, tattooing them with a need as desperate as it was confused" (45). Her confusion later manifested itself in more pain-inflicting practices:

With the tip of a wax crayon she would write 'me', over and over on the brown rise of [her growing breast ...]. With time came finer lines, from needles, marking an improvement. But there were also the ugly whip marks of cigarette tips. Angry. Impatient. And the words: Not Abigail. My Abigail. Her Abigail? Ghosts. Death. Me. Me. Me. Not. Nobody. (26-27, 33-34)

Deprived of voice and agency, Abigail then resorts to this extreme form of self-affirmation.³ Her reaction against Peter is triggered by his threat against her identitarian bodily marks. Her escape leads to her custody with social services, and to her love for the social worker Derek: "And Abigail was giving. For the first time, she wasn't taken. [...] Abigail, this Abigail, only this Abigail, always this Abigail, felt herself becoming, even in this moment of taking" (Abani 2006: 52). On one hand, such moments of happiness seem to offer her a way to affirm a respected identity – something she cannot help recording on her skin (53); on the other hand, her relationship with adult and married Derek is morally and legally unacceptable, so he is fired and tried for abusing a minor. She finds herself invisible again,

³ Significantly, Abani attributes a similar attitude to some of his fellow *gaolers* in his poetry collection *Kalakuta Republic*, concerning his own imprisonment under Nigeria's military regime in the late 1980s: "Invisibility // stalks our every step. Some men brand, / with cashew sap, their names on buttocks, stomachs, // Hidden / from view. A welt to remind them of / who they really are, their past, their only hope" ("Tattoo"; Abani 2000: 49). More generally, Francesca Giommi (forthcoming: 4-5) recognizes an analogous tendency throughout Abani's *oeuvre*.

under the care of institutions protecting her, but which take her only choice away from her regardless of her opinions, and therefore the voice, the agency, and the identity she briefly glimpsed: “But what are the limits of desire? The edges beyond which love must not cross? Those were questions she had heard others discuss in these last few days. Discuss as if she was a mere ghost in their presence. Called this thing between Derek and her wrong. How could it be?” (79)

Abani’s novel thus renders fictionally the trap which victims of new slavery find themselves in once they manage to escape their torturers. In many cases, British legislation and institutions are not prepared to offer real help to regain self-dignity, and are therefore criticised at length by Anderson, Waugh, Gupta, and Rendell, who all lay bare their limited (if not counter-productive or connivant) effect. These writers all report stories by/about people who feel, one way or another, “let down by immigration services” (Waugh 2006: 159).⁴ Abani’s Abigail is taken by this current of events to the Needle, a monument symbolic of her failed body-writing attempts at self-affirmation; there, where she imagines “she could see all the ghosts of those who had also ended it there” (Abani 26), her tragic end is consummated.

Rendell and Abani’s endings are not so distant, after all. Both close their novels with a victim sacrificed to the mechanisms of new slavery in the contemporary UK. Nevertheless, their narrative perspectives mark a decisive difference in emphasis: Simisola’s unvoiced, gaping void at the centre of Wexford’s investigation, opposed to Abigail’s conspicuous, masochistic, desperate form of writing.

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⁴ Cf. also Craig *et al.* 2007: 31.

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