

# Fragmentation, Negotiation and Ethnicity in Barbara Nadel's Inspector İkmen Series

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Artikkelissa tarkastellaan väkivallan, rikollisuuden ja monikulttuurisuuden kytköksiä neljässä brittiläisen dekkaristin Barbara Nadelin Istanbuliin sijoitetussa rikosromaanissa. Ne ovat *Beshazzar's Daughter* (1999), *Arabesk* (2001), *Deep Waters* (2002) ja *Dead of Night* (2012). Väkiälyä tarkastellaan suhteessa historiaan, paikkaan ja tilaan, sekä materiaaliin käytäntöihin, jotka toimivat identiteettien rakennusaineina monikulttuurisessa tilanteessa. Representaatio ja hybridisyys ovat keskeisiä käsitteitä, joiden avulla eri ihmisryhmien kollektiivisten ja yksilöllisten identiteettien rakentumista tarkastellaan suhteessa kussakin romaanissa muodostuvaan yhtenäisen identiteetin normiin. Artikkelin mukaan romaanit korostavat ajatusta siitä, että normiin sitoutuminen ja kulttuurisen hybridyyden torjuminen tuottaa väkiälyä monikulttuurisessa tilanteessa. Kertoessaan tarinoita väkivallan syistä ja seurauksista eri etnisten ryhmien sisällä ja välillä, romaanit tuovat esiin paitsi monikulttuurisuuteen liittyviä ongelmia, myös sen tuottamia mahdollisuuksia. Niiden yhteiskunnallinen viesti korostaa dialogia keinona konfliktien välttämiseen.

**Key words:** crime fiction, fragmentation, negotiation, hybridity, ethnicity, identity

## 1 Introduction

Because of its rich history, broad ethnic and cultural variety, its geographical and geopolitical position between the east and the west, and the images of the Orient produced by western literature in general, Istanbul has fascinated western writers of popular fiction for a long time. In Ian Fleming's *From Russia with Love* James Bond visits Istanbul during the cold war in 1957, and also Eric Ambler set his story *The Light of Day* (1962) in Istanbul. A more recent example is Laurence O'Bryan's thriller *The Istanbul Puzzle* (2011), which combines historical myths and oriental mysteries with the contemporary theme of fundamentalist terrorism.

Contemporary crime fiction frequently makes use of locality. Sometimes the descriptions of the locations of fictional crimes are so accurate that readers can in fact walk in the footsteps of their favourite detectives in the real environment, visit the street on which they live or have a cup of coffee in their favourite café. However, location is

not only a place where the murder case takes place, but it also functions as a starting point for the construction of the space in which the narrative universe of the novel exists. Thus, in many crime writers' productions the real physical place is inherently intertwined with the story, as well as with the culture and values it represents. Since fictional places, no matter how realistically drawn, always remain representations, they can function as flexible devices for narrative expression.

Many of today's crime writers who have chosen to set their novels in Istanbul have constructed a fictional narrative space for their stories by drawing from the cultural and ethnic diversity of the city. For example in the novels of Esmahan Aykol, Mehmet Murat Somer and Jason Goodwin, multiculturalism, marginalisation and violence are discussed in a popular form with the help of a murder mystery. Also British writer Barbara Nadel's novels present clashes between groups of people as productive of violence. In her Inspector İkmén series the themes of marginalisation and negotiation of cultural and ethnic identities are placed in a historical context and in the context of cultural diversity. The series comprises altogether 15 novels published between 1999 and 2013. The novels are mainstream crime stories featuring Inspector Çetin İkmén and his multicultural crew who solve crimes in a city characterized by history and tradition, contemporary national and international politics, heavy urbanization, and constantly growing cultural and ethnic diversity. The murder cases include a cross-section of individuals representing the cultural and social complexity of the city and expose the sometimes drastic consequences of the failure to negotiate identities in the riptide of conflicting ethnic, religious and other social norms.

Using Istanbul, with its broad ethnic diversity, as the setting for the İkmén stories, enables the scrutiny of the conflicting co-existence of ethnic and social groups that exists within it. The Istanbul of the novels is, naturally, a reconstruction created by an English crime writer, and like Venice in Donna Leon's Brunetti novels or Edinburgh in Ian Rankin's Rebus series, it provides an imaginary space that is already populated with earlier representations of the city. In his well-known book *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said discusses how the Orient is an inherently western construction and produced as such through different textual practices. The East, as described in western texts, is thus a

representation produced through western conceptualization. Representation is typically a fluid process of meaning creation in which cultural images are analysed, produced and reproduced (cf. Hall 1997; Dyer 2002). Thus, in Nadel's novels Istanbul is also presented as a multicultural setting through constructions of language, culture, and ideology, combined with the generic conventions of crime fiction that recreate the setting as a site of crime.

The aim of this article is to discuss how multiculturalism is related to violent crime in four Inspector İkmèn novels, *Belshazzar's Daughter* (1999), *Arabesk* (2001), *Deep Waters* (2002) and *Dead of Night* (2012). Three relations manifest themselves as central in these novels: first, violence, and more specifically murder, is presented as something that is related to the intertwining of the past and present, and the anxieties that arise from historical events. Second, history is presented as interwoven with place and space. It is interesting to point out that the place that becomes most central in the crime case is not always the location of the murder itself. For example in the novels discussed in this paper, place invariably comprises imaginary locations, such as the home country of the characters before the diaspora of the families or ethnic communities that are now afflicted by the acts of violence described in the stories. Thus physical place relates to a broader space that incorporates culture, linking with the third relation, which refers to the material practices of different groups of people, including 'lived' values and traditions. These issues lie at the heart of the crises that Nadel presents in her novels as productive of violence.

## **2 Multiculturalism and hybridity**

Multiculturalism is commonly treated as a positive phenomenon. However, when defining the term 'multiculturalism', Clive J. Christie (1998: 223–234) also pays attention to the negative components involved in the co-existence of groups of people representing different values and traditions, and the difficulty of finding a balance between cultural identifications as they appear at different levels of society. In addition to the richness of cultural exchange, the term thus also denotes a sense of searching for certainty and status in a strange and threatening environment in which the individual

tries to preserve their own culture and community and at the same time participate collectively in the wider society. This means that the individual is constantly balancing between isolation and participation.

The process of constructing a cultural identity in the riptide of conflicting demands that exist within a multicultural setting in which some groups are rendered socially more marginal than others, is a constant process of negotiation between ‘our’ culture, as experienced by the individual, and the wider society. This space that is used for the negotiation of cultural identity is always characterised by ambiguity and contradiction, since it creates what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls a ‘Third Space’, one that is inherently defined by cultural hybridity. The term ‘hybridity’ is often used to refer to “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007: 108), and as such it is basically applicable to all societies in which different ethnicities coexist in circumstances that are governed by certain hierarchies and norms. Hybridity should not, as Bhabha (1994: 38) points out, be understood in terms of “the exotism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures”. Instead of referring to mere cross-cultural exchange, cultural hybridity points towards “an alien territory” (Bhabha 1994: 38), a radical renegotiation, intertwining and merging of what is understood as original in cultures.

### **3 The fragmentation of identities in a multicultural setting**

In the novels discussed below, violence is generated as a result of the failure to negotiate cultural identities in terms of hybridity in a multicultural setting. In society, all ethnic groups can be considered interdependent. However, the people that are subjected to violence and its fatal consequences refuse to acknowledge this interdependence, and as a result of this they fail to embrace the opportunity for creating a space within which the negotiation of identities in terms of hybridity is possible. This leads to social marginalisation and crises of identity, the most drastic outcome of which is the acceptance of, support for, or active participation in violence.

### 3.1 History, escapism and seclusion

In the first İkmek novel, *Belshazzar's Daughter* (1999), the above mentioned pattern is evident. In the narrative, the past manifests itself as a central constituent of the present. This characteristic is not present only in the novel in question, but runs through the series as a thread to which issues of ethnicity, difference, negotiation of identities, and crime are related. As Inspector İkmek points out in a later novel, *Dead of Night*: "The past is always relevant" (2012: 280). In this particular story, the murder mystery links to 20<sup>th</sup> century European history and the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia. In the period before the final fall of the Ottoman regime many Russian refugees, particularly those who were part of the nobility, and whose lives were threatened by the Bolsheviks, fled to Turkey and found a safe haven in Istanbul. The novel speculates around the mysterious destinies of Tsar Nicholas's two children who were not buried together with the other family members, describing the secluded life of a shockingly dysfunctional Russian family. The matriarch claims to be one of the daughters of the Romanov family who survived the Bolshevik bloodbath and escaped to Istanbul. There she sets up an incestuous and degenerate family dynasty, which she manages to hold in an iron grip for 70 years. Space and memory are intertwined in the family's existence: the derelict family house in which the family continues to live its secluded life is a closed space that represents a faded copy of old Russia in miniature. However, when a young Englishman becomes infatuated with the young grand-daughter of the matriarch and makes his way into the well-protected family space, the escapist culture of the long-extinct Russian nobility is forced into an encounter with the contemporary world, at which point a clash is inevitable.

The novel describes the Russian family as victims of the matriarch's elitist claim that prevents the younger generations from integrating into the wider society. By declining the challenge of negotiating identities in terms of hybridity in the multicultural setting, and instead holding on to the phantoms of the past in order to preserve and defend her family, she renders three generations of her family vulnerable. The violence that breaks out culminates symbolically in a fire that burns the family house, in which the matriarch remains trapped, together with the other material reminders of her degenerated empire.

*Belshazzar's Daughter*, with its description of the violent consequences of seclusion and of the refusal to surrender into dialogue with the wider society, promotes the idea that no group of people, small or large, can act as an island, and no minority can protect itself against the threat of fragmentation by retreating into its shell and silencing the voices that bespeak crisis. The ultimate claim, in the novel, comes in the form of a violent outbreak.

### 3.2 Power imbalance and the claim of tradition

In *Arabesk* (2001) identities are constructed in terms of conflict in a setting in which temporal, spatial and socio-cultural distances are presented as central ingredients in the murder mystery. The novel introduces another dysfunctional family, this time haunted by the restrictions of compelling ethnic tradition and economic imbalance, in relation to which all members of the household have to define their positions. This family is also led by a powerful woman, the popular and wealthy arabesk singer Tansu Hanım who offers a luxurious home – a golden cage – not only to her sister, but also to the small family of a young man, Erol Urfa, who is her lover and protégé. Forced by tradition, this man lives in an arranged marriage with a young country girl from his home village, who becomes the innocent victim of murder in the novel.

Despite the marginal position of the victim in the Hanım household, her death naturally shakes the family's status quo and, as intended, focuses on the character of Tansu Hanım because of her economic power on which the rest of the family depends. While it does not deprive her of this power, it calls for a reassessment of the ways in which it is exercised in relation to the construction of the individual identities and emotional relationships within the household. By killing young Ruya, the murderer, Tansu's sister Latife, forces into visibility the emotional marginalisation that concerns all the members of the family. Her subservience in the shadow of her more successful sister who fails to acknowledge her subjectivity and denies her independence, Erol's resignation to coercive ethnic tradition, Ruya's total objectification, and finally, Tansu's illusion of marriage with the man she loves, show the vulnerability of the family in the riptide of unarticulated and conflicting desires.

The discrepancy between Tansu's wishful thinking and the actual reality gives Latife the initiative for murder. It is the uncompromising norm of forced marriage only within one's own ethnic group that governs Erol, and as Latife states, would, despite the death of his first wife, force him "to return to his village and marry another child-woman instead of her [Tansu]" (2001: 378). Latife's cruel plea for recognition from her sister's side draws from a multicultural situation in which the contact zone between cultures remains strictly closed, and efforts to negotiate identities across these boundaries are fended off by the minority's rigidly protectionist traditions.

### 3.3 Violence as ethnic glue

The question of violence as a way of defining a minority's cultural identity in relation to that of the majority becomes pronounced in *Deep Waters* (2002). The story revolves around the death of a young Albanian who is found with his throat slit on a square in central Istanbul. The murder method refers to the Albanian tradition of blood feud and honour killing, *gjakmaria*, which has been keeping a hold on the family of the murder victim for several generations. Through blood feud the Albanian community in Istanbul not only demarcates its difference from the majority culture, but this ancient tradition also serves as a way of establishing relations of hegemony between the different clans, the *fis*. Despite its devastating consequences, the custom nevertheless functions as a way of establishing a common ethnic identity which draws from the memory of a common ancestry and home. History, place and old traditions thus constitute an imaginary space to which the community refers back to from its present diaspora situation. Gina Wisker (2007: 92) describes diaspora as "permanent displacement" or as "living out of place in the new culture and yet making their own versions of it, their own versions of the self, while still retaining versions of their home culture". Although far away from their original home both spatially and temporally, Albanian families in Istanbul, entangled in the complicated regulations of *gjakmaria*, are held captive in a space that is preserved through patriarchal oppression, fear and violence. The individuals' versions of the self are constructed through identification with tradition as opposed to the potential represented by hybridity, which prevents dialogue with and participation in the wider society.

Very often in contemporary crime fiction, the detective protagonist becomes drawn into the case on a personal level. Typically, he or she may be the object of desire of the murderer, or their family may be threatened by the murderer. Inspector İkmen, who himself is of Albanian descent from his mother's side, becomes personally engaged in the murder case when a member of a *fis* formerly "in blood" with the powerful Bajraktars (the family of İkmen's mother) implies that İkmen's mother never died a natural death but was actually yet another victim of *gjakmaria*. From that point on, for İkmen, the detection process becomes a journey back to his and his Albanian family's past, one that is filled with traumatic memories, uncertainty and concern for his family members. Therefore the plot is not only focused on finding out and constructing the story surrounding the murder of the young Albanian man, but it is also about the re-construction of the narrative of İkmen's own past.

The claim for a reconceptualization of the past that is proposed to İkmen puts forward the idea that history, since being a collection of narratives that are shaped by ideologies, beliefs and conflicts of interests, which produce representations of events, is volatile and subject to change. J. Porter Abbott (2002: 3) points out how narrative functions as our most important tool with regards to our understanding of time. In this novel, the idea of the past as a collection of stories narrated with different objectives in mind, provides the option for finding a constructive solution, and draws attention to the possibility for change. Furthermore, in the case of this novel specifically, it offers a way out from the vicious circle of violence to which the Albanian community has been subjected. Which story is then pursued becomes the key.

Although the motive of death of the young man eventually proves not to have been *gjakmaria*, based on irrational intergenerational hatred, but a crime of passion committed by a young man misled by his mentally disturbed sister, the mere prospect of *gjakmaria* and the requirements made by tradition that go with it, forces the Albanian community, along with its laws, morals, and the values of different generations onto a collision course with the wider society. The members of the community that subscribe to old laws and construct their identities in terms of seclusion from the wider society swear in the name of revenge. However, also some ways out of the restrictive straight-

jacket of tradition are indicated in the novel, as represented by individuals who are prepared to risk their lives and pay the price of seclusion from their own community, as they refuse to participate in the vicious circle of blood feud. One of them proves to be İkmèn's mother Ayşe, whose voluntary surrender to death ends the vicious circle of revenge between two families. The three young members of the Albanian community who, after the death of the young Albanian, break loose from tradition and choose integration with the wider society, are also pointed out as harbingers in a process of change, which is seen as inevitable.

### 3.4 Clashes with the norm of whiteness

While in *Deep Waters* serious conflicts and their effects on the construction of cultural identities within one ethnic group are discussed, in *Dead of Night*, published in 2012, the conflicts happen between different groups distinguished by ethnicity and social standing. Moreover, instead of placing the story in the familiar setting of Istanbul, Nadel has chosen Detroit in the US as the crime scene. By doing so, the novel concretely emphasizes distance with regards to both physical place and cultural space. Similarly to the novels set in Istanbul, historical events of the past act as the surface against which the 'current' events of the novel are contemplated. Moreover, also in this novel the problematic of negotiating one's identity in a multicultural setting is seen as the key to understanding related situations in which violence breaks out.

In *Dead of the Night*, Inspector İkmèn and his colleague Mehmet Suleyman travel to the USA to participate in a conference organized in Detroit, which after the crash of the car industry seems to them like a cold urban nightmare with its high unemployment rates, poverty, criminality, and strict racial, ethnic and social segregation. At the very beginning of their visit İkmèn becomes involved in a cold murder case, the death of a young Melungeon, Elvis Goins, whose ethnic origin had rendered him a social outcast. This case provides İkmèn with a close view of the reality surrounding the aftermath of the collapse of the industrial society, and processes by which certain groups of people have been rendered racially or ethnically more visible, and socially inferior. Through

practices of 'racialisation' and 'ethnicisation' these individuals have become equated with criminality in the eyes of wider society.

Although race and ethnicity are often talked about in essentialist terms, in cultural studies they are treated as social constructs, and 'racialised' and 'ethnicised' identities are seen as processes whereby differences between people are marked, as Kath Woodward (2004: 125) states, "on the basis of assumptions about human physical or cultural variations and the meanings of these variations". Thus 'racialisation' and 'ethnicisation' are about constructing and sustaining differences between people through different social and psychological processes. Moreover, also material effects, such as different practices of racism and ethnic discrimination, are included as part of the process of social construction.

In the novel's Detroit setting, multiculturalism is set against the norm of whiteness, denoting a fragmentation of identities that leads to cultural clashes between different ethnic groups. In *The Matter on Images* (2002) Richard Dyer points out how whiteness, although an inherent part of the ethnicised social structure, tends to be positioned outside of it. Since whiteness is presented as the norm, it becomes the invisible marker against which other ethnicities are compared, and as such it is also automatically produced as a monolithic, privileged category. This is the case also with the ethnicised social structure in Nadel's novel, since all ethnicities besides whiteness are presented as contrary to it. Whiteness in this case is ironically represented by the main criminal, a wealthy and eccentric man who defines himself exclusively in terms of hegemonic, normative whiteness. However, the normative white identity, against which the 'ethnicised' identities are measured, proves to be in crisis. As in the novels discussed above, the refusal to negotiate positions of identity in the new social setting proves to be a destructive strategy. The rich old man's desperate crimes aimed at sustaining his hegemony eventually come to daylight, and his adherence to protectionism, grounded in an irrational hatred of the ethnicised other renders his identity fragmented.

In *Dead of Night*, Nadel draws a parallel between Istanbul and Detroit, and equals the east and the west, when it comes to the negotiation of identities in multicultural settings.

The novel promotes the idea of socially viable multiculturalism, despite all the challenges it involves, as opposed to the adoption of rigid identity positions and the eventual risk of fragmentation they entail for those who subscribe to them. The idea of the fundamental hybridity of all identities is, in the novel, explicitly voiced by the mother of a murdered black policewoman, who says: “White? Black? What’s the matter? Too much of all that in this city. People are people!” (Nadel 2012: 234). In addition, the novel expresses the idea that in the complicated contemporary world, the mechanisms of ethnic discrimination as well as the challenges produced by it, including downright racism, do not apply only in Detroit, as indicated by the mother of the murdered Officer Rita Addison, but are universal issues. At the end of the novel, when the case is closed and İkmén is discussing it with a Detroit colleague, he expresses the idea of a common challenge that all those who fight violent crime face: “Detroit is a city of people just like Istanbul, ...’You think we don’t have killers in my city? You think you are unique?’” (2012: 330).

#### **4 Conclusions**

The novels discussed in this article deal with the clashes between the cultural values or value systems of the different characters in the novels that expose them to violence. This links to the convention in contemporary crime fiction to highlight and analyse the workings of social structures and practices that maintain hegemonic power, something seen as generative of crime in society. In Nadel’s novels this power is also described as generative of a claim for unified identities with the help of which ethnicised and other socially constructed groups demarcate their specificity in relation to other groups.

The main argument put forward by the novels is firstly, that social demarcation always creates a risk zone in which clashes of conflicting desires can develop into violent crime. Secondly, the novels do not lay the blame exclusively on the hegemonic groups, or put forward unilateral discrimination as the cause of violence. Although the perspective for the scrutiny of the social situation in the novels is mostly that of minority groups, these are not treated as blameless victims of oppressive power, but are quite often seen as equally liable partners that hold an equal amount of responsibility to

engage in dialogue with the group or groups they themselves also construct as the other. Thus, in a world where meeting difference is inevitable, the necessity for abandoning strict demarcations and negotiating identities in terms of hybridity should be a concern for everybody. Gina Wisker (2007: 190) states that the lynchpin of hybridity is to “align [...] itself with cultural equity despite difference.” At the end of *Deep Waters*, in a discussion with one of the most adamant demarcationists, a representative of one of the Albanian families intertwined with the vicious circle of blood feud, inspector İkmèn (Nadel 2012: 429), the main moral authority in the novel series, expresses what genuine hybridity means to him: “I think it is something called love, Angeliki,” he said as the door opened. “It’s something that doesn’t depend on blood or belong to any particular *fis*. Just love.”

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