The Anonymous Letter in the 
Construction of Racial Prejudice
(Julian Barnes, Arthur & George)

Anoniminio laiško vaidmuo 
konstruojant rasizmą Juliano
Barneso romane Arthuras &
George‘as

Oksana WERETIUK
University of Rzeszow
Institute of English Studies
Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies
Al. mjr. W. Kopisto 2B
35-315 Rzeszów, Poland
oksanaw@ur.edu.pl

Summary

The article is an attempt to provide a postcolonial interpretation of racism in Arthur & George, a historical novel by Julian Barnes. The main character, George Edalji, the son of an English pastor of Indian descent and a Scottish mother identifies himself as “full English.” His birth, citizenship, education, religion, profession confirm his British status. More and more often, the intelligent, slow, too much introverted “hybrid” is exposed to acts fueled by the racial intolerance of the local community members, which occur behind the rectory fence of the vicarage. All the time the Edalji family suffers from the attacks of a poisonous racist’s anonymous letters. In Arthur & George, the author of Sherlock Holmes runs a private investigation in defense of George. He carefully reads all the letters and becomes certain of a growing aversion to the Edaljis and especially to the intelligent George, a solicitor. The novel shows race-based aversion to the dark-skinned neighbor, whose otherness was sufficient evidence of his guilt, not only for the local community, but also for most of British society, including public institutions such as the police, courts, and even the government. With the help of the anonymous letters, introduced into the plot, Barnes does not present racism as an act of overt discrimination or aggression, as Victorian-era British society is apparently free from racial prejudice. Invisible, “subcutaneous” racism operates insidiously.

Key words: Victorian racism, anonymous letters, postcolonial criticism, historical novel, Arthur Conan Doyle.

http://dx.doi.org/10.15823/alc.2014.06
Santrauka

Straipsnio tikslas yra pristatyti Juliano Barneso romane *Arthuras & George’as* aptinkamo rasizmo pokolonialinę interpretaciją. Kūrinys vaizduoja augančią rasistinę antipatiją indų kilmės pastoriaus George'o Edalji šeimai. Romano autorius parodo, jog kitokia, tamsesnė odos spalva tampa pakankamu pagrindu pastorių apkaltinti – ne tik vietinėje bendruomenėje, bet visoje britų visuomenėje, įskaitant tokias valstybines įstaigas kaip policija, teismai ir net vyriausybė. Pasitelkęs anoniminius laiškus, J. Barnesas rasizmo nevaizduoja kaip atviro diskriminacijos ar agresijos, tačiau jis greičiau yra nematomas, besislepiantis po oda.

**Esminiai žodžiai:** Viktorijos laikų rasizmas, anoniminiai laiškai, pokolonialinė kritika, istorinis romanas, Arthuras Conanas Doyle’as.

**The Anonymous Letter in the Construction of Racial Prejudice**

*(Julian Barnes, *Arthuras & George*)

Before presenting my postcolonial interpretation of racism with the help of the anonymous letters used by Julian Barnes (1946 - ) in his historical novel *Arthur & George* (2005), I find it is necessary to emphasize that the novel boasts a masterful composition and a multi-layered construction, which present a story that really happened to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a doctor and a well-known writer, and George Edalji, a lawyer, the humble son of an English pastor of Indian descent and a Scottish mother. Two storylines – one about George, the second about Arthur – develop separately and simultaneously, each in its own chapter. George Edalji gets into trouble, not on account of his own fault, but because of the fault of a racially prejudiced society. Subsequently the fates of both men and the two plots get intertwined.

The historical novel, *Arthur & George* is steeped in Victorian racism. Racist views from the very beginning have been based on the idea of unequal biological, social and intellectual values of the human races, usually connected to faith in the inherent superiority of one race, often recognizing its right to rule over others. The overall concept of racism in the sense of Victorian ideology and doctrine consists of three theses. The first – that has already been mentioned above – is the idea of the existence of higher races which are endowed with outstanding abilities as “culture creators” and hence they are appointed to the role of “commanders.” In the Victorian era the Anglo-Saxons were considered a higher race, thus a “superior” one. This was elaborated by Robert Knox (Davies, 1988, 73-75; Biddiss, 1976, 249), a Scotsman by birth, the creator of the Anglo-Saxon myth. The second thesis is the idea of the innate physical and psychologi-
cal differences between the races of mankind which allow us to speak of higher races and lower races. It promotes the notion of “superior” and “inferior” human races and has a direct impact on the level of the social and political life of Victorians. Benjamin Disraeli (sic! His origin was not Anglo-Saxon as well!) realized it in his political and literary activities. The third thesis stresses the harmfulness of miscegenation and calls on Victorians to maintain the purity of their blood as that of the higher race, the Anglo-Saxons. Francis Galton’s concept of voluntary eugenics aimed to produce anti-immigrant government programs. His views were reinforced by phrenology, developed by Franz Joseph Gall already in 1796. Racism is always trying to explain the cultural diversity of humanity and civilization on racial diversity grounds. Victorian racism was no different.

All of three mentioned arguments were based on the achievements of Victorian pseudoscience (Darwin’s ideas were not followed by his contemporaries).

The issues of Victorian racism, the relationships between colonizers and the colonized, were presented from the postcolonial perspective in the aforementioned contemporary novel by Julian Barnes. One of the main characters of this fiction is George Edalji, a man of Scottish and Hindu ancestry who feels himself a “true-born” English. As he confides to Arthur Conan Doyle at the end of the novel, his father, who himself comes from Bombay, but converted to the Church of England through Scottish missionaries and left India for England, „brought him to the Englishman.“ Edalji senior lives with his family in his vicarage in Great Wyrley, a large village in the district of South Staffordshire, England. Thus, the dark-skinned vicar has a dual identity (that of a conquered nation and that of an imperial one) marked by adaptation and tolerance, while the pastor’s son, a child of mixed-race, has assimilated quickly and his relation to the act of colonization is characterized by apologia. Consequently, from the first years of his conscious life his father makes him get assimilated, teaching him to acquire the language, adapt to culture and adopt the religion of the group and its high ideals; in other words, to be faithful to the British Empire. Sometimes, in the early morning, after waking the father examines his son:

“George, where do you live?”
“The Vicarage, Great Wyrley.”
“And where is that?”
“Staffordshire, Father.”
“And where is that?”
“The centre of England.”
“And what is England, George?”
“England is the beating heart of the Empire, Father.”
“Good. And what is the blood that flows through the arteries and veins of the Empire to reach even its farthest shore?”
“The Church of England.”
“Good, George.” (Barnes, 2006, 23)

George spent his childhood in the peaceful and calm Vicarage, where

[T]here is Mother, who is constantly present in his life, teaching him his letters, kissing him goodnight; and Father, who is often absent because he is visiting the old and the sick, or writing his sermons, or preaching them. There is the Vicarage, the church, the building where Mother teaches Sunday school, the garden, the cat, the hens […]. This is George’s world, and he knows it well.
Inside the Vicarage, everything is quiet. (7)

Consequently, brought up in a confined parish space, George perceives his Englishness as something quite obvious and natural for him. Since his father in the depths of his soul is Hindu, Parsee, and is aware of the real state of “colony-metropolis” relations, George becomes the son of his great empire, with its “Australia and India and Canada and islands dotted everywhere,” and he does not see himself outside Englishness, as he is a “full Englishman.” Even his countrymen’s doubts about the “purity” of his origin could not evoke the unpleasant feeling of uncertainty and duality. His birth, citizenship, education, religion, and profession confirm his current British status: “He has no other land. He cannot go back two generations. He can hardly return to India, a place he has never visited and has little desire to.” (304) These are the effects of “white colonialism” in this half-Hindu and half-Scottish family.

Getting older, George finds it increasingly necessary to contact with the outside world. More and more often, the intelligent, slow, too introverted „hybrid“ is exposed to acts fueled by the racist intolerance of the local community members, which occur behind the rectory fence of the Vicarage. At the beginning someone planted a big key, stolen from the school door, under their door. George was sixteen at that time. It was almost dark when he noticed the object lying on the step of the front door of the Vicarage. He and his father sent the key with a note to the police
station. Having given the key back, instead of being rewarded, George is wrongly accused by the local police of having stolen it. A few years later George, a student of law in Birmingham, notices that even his colleagues from the university, generally polite and intelligent, publicly make fun of his origin, his otherness and mock dark-skinned Englishness:

- George, where are you from?
- I’m from Great Wyrley.
- No, where are you from in real?
- Is your girl dark skinned?
- She is an Englishwoman, just like me.
- Same as you, George? Yes, totally the same? (98)

But the worst experience in the life of Edalji family is connected to anonymous letters. When George was twelve his parents informed him with impatience about the first anonymous letters they received. “They [the letters] say wicked things. About… everyone.” the vicar explained. All the time the family suffers from racist / racially motivated attacks of unknown people. These letters, put into the main narration, play a prominent role in the construction of the novel, especially in its ideology. The anonymous letters written by his countrymen turned out to be the most effective and drastic measure of racial harassment against Edalji. The word anonymity derives from the Greek word ἄνωνυμον, anowyma, meaning “without a name” or “namelessness.” In colloquial use, “anonymous” is used to describe situations in which the acting person’s name is unknown. The term “anonymous letter” typically refers to a message that does not reveal its sender. Using these same words Edalji senior explains to his son the sense of the first anonymous letters they received at the beginning of the 1890s. In many countries, anonymous letters are protected by law and must be delivered as regular letters. This was the case in Victorian England; though, at the same time, the principles of Victorian etiquette – *Do’s and Don’ts of Letter Writing*, apart from guidelines for writing letters, included a clear-cut prohibition against anonymous writing: “Never write an anonymous letter. It is the sign of a coward. Anyone who receives such a letter should not give any consideration to its content.”* Unfortunately, this instruction did not turn out to be useful in practice.

Anonymous threatening letters were sent to the Vicarage both ways: officially (in the 1880s, roadside letter boxes were already used in the British Isles, the first pillar boxes were erected in 1852 at St Hellier in
Jersey on the recommendation of Anthony Trollope, who was working as a Surveyor’s Clerk for the Post Office) and in a hole-and-corner, i.e. a secret, way. These messages included – as the vicar softly explained to his son – the unpleasant things said about all of them. Simultaneously, graffiti slandering the Edaljis was written on the outside and inside walls of the Vicarage. Furthermore, “gifts,” accompanied by compromising announcements signed by the vicar and his son, and other unwanted material were sent to them (a pewter ladle on a window sill; a garden fork pinning a dead rabbit to the lawn; three eggs broken on the front step; dead birds, excrement and so on). Very soon the pseudonymous letters became worse and worse – instead of “unpleasant things” they were filled with violent hatred towards the Edaljis. When the vicar and his wife informed police Sergeant Upton about similarities between the Vicarage’s maid’s, Elizabeth Foster’s handwriting and that of the threatening pseudonymous letters, the police accused George of anonymous writing. After that the father and the son received a new letter, which had an entirely new form – an impertinent, bravura and praiseworthy poem in honor of Sergeant Upton:

Ha, ha, hurrah for Upton! Good old Upton!
Blessed Upton. Good old Upton! Upton is blessed!
Dear old Upton!
    Stand up, stand up for Upton
    Ye soldiers of the Cross
    Lift high your royal banner
    It must not suffer loss. (48)

The vicar and his wife decided that in future they would open all mail to the Vicarage themselves.

George’s studies must not be interfered with. Therefore he does not see the letter which begins: ‘I swear by God that I will do harm to some person. The only thing I care about in this world is revenge, revenge, sweet revenge I long for, then I shall be happy in hell.’ Nor does he see the one that says: ‘Before the end of the year your kid will be either in the graveyard or disgraced for life.’ (48)

They understood perfectly well that their family – and especially George – were being stalked by unknown persons. It was distressing; his son’s future, his social status as a lawyer, furthermore, his life were threat-
en. Somebody was persecuting them with unwanted and obsessive attention in order to threaten them all. Stalking is a crime, a criminal offence in many countries. The Victorian law stated that a person was guilty of stalking if they got engaged in a series of prohibited acts with the intention of causing physical or mental harm to the victim, or causing fear or apprehension with regard to the victim’s safety, or the safety of their loved ones. In everyday life stalking takes place when a person keeps contacting or spying on you without your permission, causing fear or distress. It includes sending letters, notes, ‘gifts’ or other unwanted material, interfering with or damaging your property, spreading malicious gossip, making direct or indirect threats to harm you or your loved ones.

The number of letters sent to the Vicarage started increasing; they were posted from Cannock, Walsall, Rugeley, Wolverhampton and even Great Wyrley itself. These messages and hoaxes continued. It seemed that Shapurji’s plea to the police to examine them triggered further provocation. The Vicar did not know how to cope with it. “After more than two years of persecution, Shapurji decides to approach the Chief Constable again. He writes an account of events, encloses samples of the correspondence, points out respectfully that a clear intention to murder is now being expressed,” (63) but Captain Anson ignores the request. Furthermore, he believes that George wrote these letters with the cleverness of a prospective lawyer. Harassment of the Edaljis lasted for two years and became more and more oppressive; however, the local police did not interrupt it. Firstly, British Victorian police – regardless of Victorian etiquette – gave credence to anonymous letters. Secondly, the Victorian police, and especially that in South Staffordshire, was steeped in racial prejudice. Later on, in the second half of the book, where the fates of both men and two plots are connected, Arthur Conan Doyle’s close investigation of the Edaljis’s police correspondence will unmask the police and prove them to be liars.

George, protected – with the help of his parents – from the attacks of the most harmful letters, graduates in Birmingham. He opens an office at 54 Newhall Street and “feels confident and happy with the law.” (89) But the anonymous letters do not stop. Diabolic revenge, aimed at his family, fills them. The vicar and his wife still conceal these messages from George, but some of them were addressed to him directly. The sender filled in his name as Beelzebub. “The same sort of letters; libelous, blasphemous, lunatic. They come to his office, which he feels as an
insolent instruction: this is where he is safe, and respected, where life is orderly.” (113) George as a solicitor, a lawyer, attempts to continue his life normally: “this is, after all, his right as a freeborn Englishman. But it is difficult when you feel yourself spied upon.” (126) The only moment during the day when he considers himself safe is when his father locks the bedroom door. In this way he spends twenty four years of his life more or less normally. Receiving “hate mail” is deeply disturbing, especially the kind that is full to the brim with malice and spite. Anonymous letters can be both psychologically and ethically difficult to deal with. This is because the author usually knows that he/she will have free reign over the content of their letter. In Great Wyrley of the 1890s free reign allowed one to give vent to their hatred; in the first instance the countrymen felt hatred towards racial otherness.

The faithful priest of the Church of England noticed that there was more and more religious fanaticism by a maniac in the anonymous letters. They were signed by God, Beelzebub, by Satan and the Devil. The unknown author of these messages claimed “to be eternally lost in Hell.” “When this mania begins to show a violent intent, the Vicar fears for his family. ‘I swear by God that I will murder George Edalji soon.’ ‘May the Lord strike me dead if mayhem and bloodshed do not ensure.’ ‘I will descend into Hell showering curses upon you […]’.” (63) Later on, acquiescing to George’s request to defend him, Sir Arthur read them carefully and noticed lunatic racist moods in these anonymous letters.

‘My dear Shapurji’, he read, ‘I have great pleasure in informing you that it is now our intention to review the persecution of the Vicar!!! (shame of Grate Wyrley).’ It was a competent hand, he thought, rather than a neat one.” … a certain lunatic asylum not a hundred miles distant from your thrice cursed home… and that you will be forcibly removed in case you give way to any strong expressions of opinion.’ No spelling mistakes either, so far. ‘I shall send a double number of the most hellish postcards in your name and Charlotte’s [The Vicar’s wife] […] I repeat that there will be no need for the lunacy act to take you in charge as these persons are sure to have you arrested.’ And then, in four descending lines, a mocking farewell:

Wishing you a Merry Christmas and New Year,

I am ever

Yours Satan

God Satan

‘Poisonous,’ said Sir Arthur. (314)
All the time the Edalji family suffers from the attacks of the racist anonymous letters. Also the residents who are in closer contact with the pastor get anonymous threats. One of these letters, scribbled “in a childlish, unconfident scrawl,“ with incorrect spelling and punctuation, testifies to the fact that the bacillus of racial prejudice has infected the youngest inhabitants of the village: “Unless you run away from the black I’ll murder you and mrsbrookes I know your names abn I’ll tell you wrote.” (56)

With the help of this overall campaign, in which anonymous letters (addressed to the Edaljis and to the police) played the role of knock-down blows, the fictitious George Edalji as well as the real George Ernest Thompson Edalji (March 1876 – 17 June 1953), an Anglo-Indian solicitor and the son of a vicar, served 3 years of hard labor, having been unfairly found guilty of the charge of injuring a horse. He was pardoned after a campaign in which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle played a prominent role.

In Barnes’s novel the author of Sherlock Holmes read all the letters carefully. Many times he sat at his desk with the bundles of letters, a magnifying glass, a notebook and his propelling pencil. Once

He took a deep breath and then slowly, cautiously, as if watching for some evil spirit to escape, he undid the ribbons on the Vicar’s parcels and the twine on Brookes’s. […] He read them through in all their poisonous hatred and leering familiarity, their boastfulness and their near insanity, their grand claims and their triviality. I am God I am God Almighty I am a fool a liar a slanderer a sneak Oh I am going to make it hot for the postman. It was risible, yet risibility on risibility amounted to cruelty of a diabolical kind, under which the very minds of the victims might have broken down. (339)

He tried to keep peace in his penetrating mind and wrestled against his emotions. He read and reread, sorted and re-sorted, analyzed, compared, annotated. “He read the letters forwards; he read them backwards; he read them in a random sequence; he shuffled them like a pack of cards.” (341) He used all the methods of examination for authentication. Sir Arthur examined literary fingerprints, the style and grammar of the writing which could tell the general age and demeanor of an author. He knew well that some words were only used in certain areas and some physical accents were highly noticeable in the text. The author of Sherlock Holmes noticed that the correspondence had been planned with care to hit the target and then retreat into hiding to await results. Many of the samples he analyzed were motivated by malice, spite, revenge and racial prejudice. He discov-
ered the recurrent themes and motifs of the letters. He built hypotheses and conclusions. And before long his analytical mind tracked down the real criminal injuring horses and those letter-writing evil-doers.

The novel shows how growing aversion to the dark-skinned neighbor, whose otherness became sufficient evidence of his alleged guilt not only for the local community, but also for most of British society, including public institutions such as the police, courts, and even the government, turned into acts of virulent racism and destroyed his life. As a result, after the trivial investigation George was accused and convicted of animal mutilation ("probably ‘Hindu ritual knife”“(!)) and writing(!) anonymous threatening letters. Invisible, subcutaneous racism operates insidiously. Racial prejudices permeated the minds of the official authorities, and even educated people belonging to the aristocracy. Arthur Conan Doyle, while investigating the crime, notices that Captain Anson “dislikes people who are colored” (319) and is convinced that “the introduction of a colored clergyman into such a rude and unrefined parish was bound to cause a regrettable situation,” and, in addition, the introduction of “three half-caste children.” (372-373) George’s otherness, that of a half-blood Hindu-Parsee and half-blood Scot, was disheartening for the Anglo-Saxons; in their eyes he was not different, but the stranger, „not their guy.”

Aversion and prejudice towards George’s otherness seemed to have all the signs of fanaticism. In the eyes of the local community a thoughtful foreign person will confirm this strangeness in everything, whatever he/she does. For George’s persecutors not only the origin of the father testifies to his otherness, but also his personality traits and lifestyle, as George did not practice sports, had few friends and did not meet with women. He slept in a room locked up with his father and developed short-sightedness. This behavior, still conforming to acceptable standards, to which in other circumstances people would not have paid any attention, became evidence of his dangerous otherness. Someone once marked by it will forever remain a misfit. These are the consequences of looking at the world from the perspective of the colonizer.

Conclusions

The postcolonial reading of Arthur & George has showed that:

1. Colonialism and racism go hand in hand. The anonymous letters, introduced into the plot of the novel, help to understand the racist stereotypes in the colonial context.
2. This masterfully composed, multi-layered novel very subtly and skillfully unmasks Victorian colonialism and racism. It does not show racism manifested in the acts of overt discrimination or aggression – a seemingly perfect Victorian British society is free from racial prejudice. Nobody comments loudly on George’s skin color. It seems that England needn’t have complained. British Hindus are placed in the British educational system, in a high school, in the structures of the church, and even in parliamentary benches. Invisible, subcutaneous racism operates insidiously, and a form of an anonymous letter entirely corresponds with its sense.

3. Local racial prejudice was supported by the police in two ways – openly and secretly, quite in harmony with imperial ideology and colonial power, which, as Edward Said (Dathorne, 2009, 216) notes, “very often constructed the colony as the other.” Such conditions transformed racial prejudice into diabolic revenge, aimed at the minority family and destroyed its life.

4. It is Power, which drives someone to write anonymous letters motivated by malice, spite, revenge and jealousy. In *Arthur & George* it is the power of the empire and its racial prejudice. The subaltern could not speak. “[…] since that subaltern is a construct – man, woman, member of the lower order and so on – it can never be truly seen in a rigid state. Always the subaltern will be a floating signifier, never fixed in any definite signification.” (Ibid., 218) Then, Barnes, who is English, speaks from a totally different point of view and yet emerges with answers that are similar to those of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Chinua Achebe or Ngugi wa Thiong’o.

5. Even though *Arthur & George* does not meet the criteria for an epistolary novel, which must be “written in the form of a correspondence between characters,” (Morner, Rausch, 1998, 69) one-way anonymous letters fulfil a similar role in Barnes’s novel: they allow the author to present different points of view: local community, public institutions such as the police, courts, and even the government. Furthermore, they give the opportunity to explore the emotions of their authors and readers as well.

References

ing character [of the political trilogy Conningsby, Sibyl and Tancred, 1844–
O.W.] explains that the historical success of England is ‘an affair of race. A
Saxon race, protected by an insular position, has stamped its diligent and me-
thodic character on the century. And when a superior race, with a superior idea
to Work and Order advances, its state will be progressive and we shall…”

Later on, Charles Davenport (1866–1944) in his Race Crossing in Jamaica
(1929) made statistical arguments that biological and cultural degradation fol-
lowed white and black interbreeding.

This term was used by Dariusz Skórczewski, see Dariusz Skórczewski, Postko-

2014.


It can be exemplified by the fact that on 5 October 1888 a letter was sent
anonymously to the City of London Police claiming that Richard Mansfield, a
well-known actor, was Jack the Ripper; the police was on his trail. Sometimes
anonymous letters were written by the police. See Haia Shpayer-Makov, The
Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England,
Oxford University Press 2011, 133.

I used the method of postcolonial reading described by Peter Barry in Peter
Barry, Beginning Theory. An Introduction to literary and cultural theory, Man-

Literature


Barry, P. (2009). Beginning Theory. An Introduction to Literary and Cultural The-
ory. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Biddiss, M.D. (April, 1976). The Politics of Anatomy: Dr Robert Knox and Victo-
rian Racism, Proceedings of Royal Society of Medicine, 69(4), 245-250.

rica World Press.

Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Chicago: NTC Publishing Group.


gie, ½, 101-112.

http://www.logicmgmt.com/1876/etiquette/dosanddonts.htm