

Chapter 3 ~ 'The lives of ordinary people'

'...Botswana is a good country, a beacon in a troubled part of the world. It occurred to me then that one day I might write about one of the ordinary people of that country, people who try to lead lives of integrity, often in the face of great difficulties. Southern Africa is full of such people...but I had no idea then how I might do it...'

McCall Smith, 'How I became a writer', p3

'One day I went to a small village north of Gabarone to collect a chicken for Independence lunch. The chicken was being chased round the yard by a large woman in a red dress. It was a wonderful sight. Eventually she caught the chicken, wrung its neck and handed it to us with a smile. I thought 'what an enterprising lady.'

That set me thinking of writing about a woman from that part of the world and her life. I sat down to write a short story but it grew into a novel as I got so fond of the characters.'

McCall Smith in Fanny Blake, 'My first novel was a No 1 bestseller', p150

Mma Ramotswe is a combination of imagination or my subconscious or whatever's going on in there, and people I've met, people the likes of whom I suspect we've all met at sometime, in Botswana or in other countries in the region...'

McCall Smith in Mandi Smallhorne 'The Heart of Africa', p27

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, McCall Smith regularly incorporates 'real' characters into his novels and in the extracts quoted he reveals two points of interest in that his personal starting point for the creation of Mma Ramotswe was an actual ordinary woman and that his project was originally a short story. As Head developed several of her Batswana interviewees' personal testimonies in Serowe to create the stories in *The Collector of Treasures*,⁷³ McCall Smith can take a small incident or character and build it into something that has an authentic and traditional feel. He is above all a storyteller, highly aware of the African oral tradition, and in this chapter I will focus on his role as storyteller and self-styled recorder of ordinary lives. I will highlight his creation of a multi-voiced society by using a structure which enables the narration of many distinct individual stories and examine his use of language and other strategies to incorporate and value 'oral tradition'. I will also focus on his ability to write through the consciousness of a black woman, and discuss whether he has actually created individual characters or types, in fact whether there is an allegorical reading of the text.

⁷³ MacKenzie, 'Short Fiction...', p19

Storytelling and Structure

McCall Smith has made use of his insider / outsider position as a storyteller and collected many African folk tales from children and old people in Zimbabwe and Botswana which he has re-told and re-interpreted for 'the West'. In his introduction to the recently re-published collection he describes these stories as:

'part of a universal language which can speak to people across human frontiers, just as music does... The two countries from which these stories are drawn are remarkable places. The people who inhabit them are generous spirited and have a superb sense of humour. In these stories we are afforded a glimpse of the values and traditions that have made their societies so extraordinary. They speak to us from the African heart.' (*GML*: ix-xi) ⁷⁴

Though in his re-creation of traditional stories the author has 'deliberately taken certain liberties with re-telling ... to present the stories in a way which will interest and entertain a broader readership' (*GML*:ix) he has retained an atmosphere of strangeness and violence faithful to the spirit of the originals which contrasts with his re-creation of the generally ordered world of Mma Ramotswe. ⁷⁵

The Botswana novels are so structured that the Detective Agency acts as a uniting framework for shorter episodes in which multiple characters are enabled to tell their tales. They are thus 'oral style stories' as described by MacKenzie, which rely on the presence of a fictional narrator and his or her speaking voice in the story. ⁷⁶ In his analysis of the structure of the South African short story, MacKenzie, using the work of Benjamin, identified a shift through time that mirrored the move from the rural to the urban as the locus of serious fiction, a move from the strictly oral 'frontier fireside tale', an anecdotal tale with an overt narrator, to the written novel where mediation is through the consciousness of the central protagonist,

⁷⁴This passage was written after the publication of the first Botswana novels though the collection of folk tales actually pre-dates them, and reflects his overall philosophy.

⁷⁵'...Mzizi and the new wife heard the sound of singing coming from their stomachs. It was the guinea fowls singing their guinea fowl songs. This frightened the couple and they immediately seized long knives and stabbed at their stomachs to stop the noise. As the knives pierced their skins, bright blood flowed freely and they fell to the ground.' *GML*, p4

⁷⁶In *The Oral-Style South African Short Story in English*, MacKenzie used Bakhtin's development of Eichenbaum's term 'skaz' to describe literature that has an orientation toward the oral form of narration. Bakhtin argued that 'where there is no adequate form for the unmediated expression of an author's thoughts, he must resort to refracting them in someone else's discourse. Sometimes the artistic tasks are such that they can be realised only by means of double voiced discourse.' Bakhtin clarified this by saying that where 'there is one voice and this voice directly expresses the intention of the author the skaz is simple, monologic or single voiced.' If however the author 'resorts to the use of a narrator for the sake of a socially foreign discourse and socially foreign world view,' the skaz is said to be parodistic, dialogic or double-voiced.' The oral style story can therefore be simple and single voiced or complex and multi voiced. Pp 4 and 205

or an omniscient third person narrator.⁷⁷ McCall Smith has set his novels in a ‘literate’, modern African society, but as I will examine further in Chapter 4, he privileges the traditional, the pre-modern, the ‘oral’ aspects of that society, and he actually employs a combination of these storytelling modes. Though there is a third person narrator, he is not usually omniscient and writes very much through the consciousness of Mma Ramotswe, and of the other major characters Mr J.L.B. Matekone and Mma Makutsi, who also take the lead voice in different chapters and sub-plots. Two stories are sometimes presented in parallel as when Mma Ramotswe investigates the case of the government man’s family in the lands and Mma Makutsi investigates the morals of beauty queens in the city. (*MBG:Chs12 -18*)

The narrative of the first novel begins in the third person but swiftly moves to the protagonist’s perspective with her opinions being quoted but without quotation marks. ‘I am not ashamed to be called an African patriot, said Mma Ramotswe.’ (*No1: 2*)

Very soon a client comes through the door and is telling her own story. ‘“I used to have a happy life,” said Happy Bapetsi, “...then this thing happened.”’ (*No1:5*)

In this instance the client tells her story through a dialogue with Mma Ramotswe, but sometimes the other voice takes over the narration completely to tell their story, as when Precious’ father tells his moving tale of migrancy, loss and suffering; ‘I am Obed Ramotswe, and I was born near Mahalapye in 1930.’ (*No 1:14*) and Mr Badule, the husband of the fashionable lady who likes smart clothes, begins the story of his worries: ‘I am not a big important man... my father was an orderly at the High Court in Lobatse and he served many years.’ (*TG:126*)

The announcement of a story is sometimes quite explicit as when Mma Potokwane, the matron of the orphan farm tells Mr J.L.B.Matekoni; ‘[The children] will have to be fetched from the fields. But while we are waiting I am going to tell you their story. You listen to this.’ (*TG:80*) McCall Smith also highlights the interpolation of a story by his chapter headings, ‘The Children’s Tale’ (*TG:81*), ‘The Clerk’s Tale’ (*MBG:111-125*) and ‘The Cooks Tale’ (*MBG: 189-200*) the latter two of which surely constitute acknowledgement to Chaucer. The story of the boy taken for muti is introduced by means of a letter from his father to Mma Ramotswe and the ‘children’s tale’ is repeated, told by the girl herself through the device of a story she is writing for school. ‘My name is Motholeli and I am thirteen years old, almost fourteen. I have a brother who is seven. My mother and father are late...I am a girl who has had three lives.’ (*MBG:80*)⁷⁸

⁷⁷ MacKenzie, ‘Short fiction...’, p206, and Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p100

⁷⁸ The children’s tale, in which the Masarwa orphan Motholeli rescues her baby brother Puso, who has been buried alive after the death of their mother, bears a very strong resemblance to the story of the teacher Margaret Cadmore who is rescued from beside her dead mother’s body in Head’s *Maru* p12

By using the chapter title, 'The girl with three lives' McCall Smith seems to reference the titles of his own African tales, as he does in 'The boy in the night' who smelled of lion, a subplot with no logical explanation, which has echoes of his traditional story of the girl who married 'a lion disguised as a man.' (*GML:125*). The complex and varied structure of these novels thus has the effect of creating a polyphony of voices⁷⁹ which privileges the art of direct storytelling and fulfils the task of 'writing down the lives of ordinary people' (*No1:13*)

Storytelling and Language

The Botswana novels are written in prose which has been described by one much quoted critic as having 'the merits of simplicity, euphony and precision...art that conceals art,'⁸⁰ a comment which implies a constructed simplicity hiding a deeper sophistication. McCall Smith's writing, with a few aberrations already noted where the author seems to forget his adopted personae and milieu, is very straightforward, with short sentences and simple vocabulary. It seems designed for reading aloud to an audience as well as for private enjoyment. Andersson argues that this highly accessible style may be chosen in part so as not to alienate young adult or English-as-a-second language readers,⁸¹ but whatever the reason, McCall Smith contrives to synthesise the oral and the literate. There are many highly loaded meanings and assumptions behind the terms 'orality' and 'literacy',⁸² and McCall Smith, like Head, has knowledge of and respect for the art of oral storytelling, but uses a modern literary form, the novel, and he has moreover set his framework story in modern urban times and in a modern structure, the detective agency. He can therefore be seen as subverting the evolutionist, oppositional model of naïve versus sophisticated communication systems and bridging 'the great theoretical divide' by demonstrating Finnegan's view of the ongoing interdependence of communication systems and valuing the complexity of ideas and thought that exist in a 'simpler' society.⁸³

⁷⁹ Polyphony is a term coined by Bakhtin, equivalent in meaning to 'dialogic' A polyphonic novel is which permits a multiplicity of social voices that interact on more or less equal terms. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* p 263

⁸⁰ Anthony Daniels, *The Sunday Telegraph UK*, quoted on all book covers, no date reference found.

⁸¹ Andersson, 'Watching the detectives', p 2

⁸² 'Orality' according to Ong implies small-scale, face-to-face, rural, communal, traditional, authentic, developing, close to nature, 'African'; 'Literacy' implies large-scale, bureaucratic, urban, industrial, individualistic, alienated, developed, 'European.' *Literacy and Orality*

⁸³ Ong posited a linear and value laden progression from orality, which he defines as pre-literacy, to literacy, whereas Finnegan, in *What is Orality if anything?*, as well as interrogating the very nature of orality, argued for a symbiotic relationship and thus for equal value of the two modes of communication. Hofmeyr has also argued for interdependence and questioned whether any society is totally literate or totally oral.

McCall Smith is committed to comprehensible language. Mma Ramotswe, in another aside against her author, considers the *Journal of Criminology* and the Botswana Penal Code anything but user friendly and Edinburgh sleuth Isabel Dalhousie finds an article submitted for her perusal:

‘...largely unreadable, owing to the author’s style. It appeared to be written in English, but it was a variety of English which Isabel felt occurred only in certain corners of Academia where faux weightiness was a virtue.’ (*SPC:92*)

The dialogue between McCall Smith’s Motswana characters is direct and simple, and when not telling lies for the greater good, they speak their thoughts without subterfuge and dissembling. This simplicity and directness creates the impression of a society where people can trust each other with their thoughts, and the dialogue is also constructed to convey the modesty of the characters’ lives.

‘This is a very fine room,’ observed Mma Ramotswe.

Mr J.L.B.Matekoni beamed with pleasure. ‘I try to keep this room tidy,’ he said.

‘It is important to have a special room for important visitors.’

‘Do you have any important visitors?’ asked Mma Ramotswe.

Mr J.L.B.Matekoni frowned. ‘There have been none so far,’ he said. ‘But it is always possible.’ ‘Yes,’ agreed Mma Ramotswe. ‘One never knows.’ (*TG:8*)

This extract demonstrates the slow pace of the dialogue and the constant repetition of phrases and names, which places the interactions in a slower and more leisured world. The characters also take a very direct and commonsense view about some of the supposed problems created by ‘the West’, a stance that pokes fun at ‘the West’ but also maintains its superiority and constructs the supposed lack of sophistication of the characters in the imagined society.

‘Some people are slow to give,’ said Mma Potokwane. ‘It is something to do with how their mothers brought them up. I have read all about this problem in a book. There is a doctor called Dr Freud who is very famous and has written many books about such people....He says all boys are in love with their mother.’

‘That is natural,’ said Mr J.L.B.Matekoni. ‘Of course boys love their mothers. Why should they not do so?’ Mma Potokwane shrugged. ‘I agree with you. I cannot see what is wrong with a boy loving his mother.’ ‘Then why is Dr Freud worried about this?’ went on Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. ‘Surely he should be worried if they did not love their mothers...This is ridiculous. Surely he had better things to do with his time.’ (*TG:74*)

In his analysis of the speech and dialogue used by white South African writers, Coetzee argues that they write ‘a variety of English intended to sound simple, rustic, direct and slightly archaic.’

He critiques the dialogue Paton created for his rural black characters in *Cry, the Beloved Country* for falsely implying that it was an anglicised or translated version of a less sophisticated language, in this case Zulu, lacking in modern words and concepts.

‘The artificial literalism of [these] passages conveys in addition a certain naiveté, even childishness, which reflects on the quality of mind of its speaker ...’⁸⁴

Though no one could accuse Mma Ramotswe or Mma Potokwane of being naïve, their simple and stylised dialogue, though containing genuine greeting rituals and courtesies of Africa, is still highly mediated by their outsider author.

In her work on continuity and ‘authenticity’ Julian argues against the assigning of any particular virtue to either ‘literacy’ or ‘orality’ and also against a Eurocentric critique which looks for ‘clues’ such as the use of proverbs and songs as signs of authenticity in texts.⁸⁵

McCall Smith, his outsider voice intruding in Mma Ramotswe’s unlikely sophistication, also makes fun of the academic interpretation of;

‘people who made it their business to remember the affairs of the community... Today they called them oral historians, she believed; whereas in reality, they were old women who liked to remember the things that interested them most: marriages, deaths, children. Old men remembered cattle.’ (*MBG:146*)

He actually uses very few obvious proverbs and songs in his texts, rather relying on the voices of the characters to provide ‘authenticity.’ Obed Ramotswe has a picture of heaven based on:

‘...a story in Botswana about two children who are taken up to heaven by a whirlwind and find that heaven is full of beautiful white cattle. That is how I like to think of it, and I hope that it is true.’ (*No1:17*)

The fundamental importance of cattle in the life of the Batswana is reinforced throughout the texts and Mma Ramotswe and Mma Potokwane reminisce about the songs of their childhood when they hear the orphan children singing ‘The cattle come home, one, two, three...’

(*MBG:109*) Whilst cattle are a permeating theme for authenticity, wilder animals such as snakes and crocodiles also make their appearance and Mr J.L.B.Matekoni’s guilty fantasy of rescuing a naked Mma Ramotswe from a lion, which he dispatches with a hunting knife (*No1:180-181*) is reminiscent of the dream of a previous Motswana heroine Mhudi, which leads to her meeting with her true love Ra Thaga.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Coetzee ‘*Simple Language, Simple People*’ in *White Writing* p127

⁸⁵ Julien, *African Novels and the Question of Orality* pp 24-5

Nonetheless the term ‘orality’ has an accepted meaning in appreciation and criticism of African literature and was seen in the early debates, rightly or wrongly, as a test for authenticity.

⁸⁶ Plaatje, *Mhudi*, p48

Also true to oral tradition is McCall Smith's use of the story as a mode of communication in situations of conflict.⁸⁷ In the tale of the boy taken for muti, related by an unidentified omniscient narrator, his abductors tell the boy the story of 'the strange calf who died' and he understands that this means he too is going to die. (*NoI:76*) When Mma Ramotswe meets the Government Man to tell him what she has discovered about the suspected poisoning at his house she tells him a story about '...when there was a family with three sons.' Where he would not have responded to a direct confrontation, the story has its desired impact and he listens and weeps. (*MBG:216-219*)

Storytelling and women

Though the Botswana novels depict a diverse range of male and female characters, the overriding impression is that they are written through the consciousness and viewpoint of African women. As a white male author, McCall Smith seduces the reader into this impression by 'othering' men, criticizing their behaviour through the voices of his female characters and colluding with the female perspective throughout. Men are portrayed as frequently taking advantage of women and sometimes as abusive and cruel.

'These men were like leeches; they sucked away at the goodness of a woman's heart until it was dry and all her love had been used up. That took a long time, he knew, because women seemed to have vast reservoirs of goodness in them.' (*NoI:44*)

As Mma Ramotswe remarks to a client; 'Men do terrible things ... All wives are worried about their husbands. You are not alone.' (*NoI:125*) Women agree with each other however that men are usually pretty helpless and can be manipulated and managed by women, who are without doubt the superior sex. 'How terrible to be a man and have sex on one's mind all the time as men are supposed to do ... It simply beggared belief.' (*NoI:145*) 'Do men really think they can fool us that easily?... Do they think we are fools?' 'I think they do,' said Mma Pkwane. (*NoI:125*)

Women are depicted as the heroines of Africa and especially of Botswana.

'She knew how much hard work there would be in this woman 'throughout the country there were women who worked and worked and who were rarely given any praise. Politicians claimed the credit for building Botswana, but how dare they? How dare they claim the credit for all the hard work of people like Mma Kerileng [a housemother at the orphanage] and women like her.' (*MBG:103*)

⁸⁷ Couzens, quoting Finnegan; 'Though proverbs can occur in many different kinds of contexts, they seem to be particularly important in situations where there is both conflict...and some obligation that this conflict should not take on too open and personal a form.' Introduction to *Mhudi*, p13

Beauty queens may be ‘vacuous...and devoid of character’ (*MBG:112*) and some wives may be guilty of long-term deception, but the only truly negative female character is Florence Peko, the ‘sullen bad-tempered maid’ of Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. She alone is totally motivated by her own interests and prepared to break the law to achieve them. However, where Note Makoti, the calculatingly abusive first husband of Mma Ramotswe, and the ‘truly evil’ Dr Ranta have no redeeming features, the maid with ‘her battered red hat at a careless angry angle,’ (*TG:94*) is never a serious threat to the protagonists and she provides comic relief which softens her negative impact. Unlike authors who depict women competing for men, McCall Smith demonstrates respect for women in their own right and for their strong, positive and supportive relationships with each other. It is through the female network that Mma Ramotswe does much of her detective work and Mma Ramotswe and Mma Makutsi negotiate many issues of authority, confidence, occasional disagreements and mutual support in their relationship.⁸⁸

But men are not all bad in the eyes of the women.

‘There was Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, of course, who was a very good man – even if temporarily a bit odd – and there was the bishop, and there had been Sir Seretse Khama, statesman and Paramount Chief. Dr Merriweather, who ran the hospital at Molepolele he was a good man, and there were others less well known...Mr Potolani, who helped very poor people and gave away most of his money; and the man who fixed her roof and repaired Roses bicycle for nothing when he saw it needed fixing.’ (*MBG:137*)

In her equal and mutually supportive relationship with Mr J.L.B. Matekoni and in her reverence for her ‘late’ father Obed, Mma Ramotswe is shown to be an African feminist or womanist at heart. Her competence, worldliness, independence and free thinking religious philosophy subvert the generalized Western feminist picture of third world women as the homogenous, helpless victims of culture and circumstance, which has been eloquently critiqued by Mohanty.⁸⁹ She is also, due to her ‘traditional build’, a comfortable and non-threatening character to men and women alike. McCall Smith, race and gender outsider, uses this female persona to comment on issues that might be difficult or taboo for a male character and he creates this African woman from a feminist but not a radical viewpoint.

⁸⁸ Through philosopher Isabel Dalhousie McCall Smith reflects that; ‘women were so much more natural in their friendships...Men were so different: they kept their friends at arms length and never admitted their feelings for them. How arid it must be to be a man; how constrained; what a whole world of emotion, and sympathy, they must lack; like living in the desert.’ (*SPC: 86*)

⁸⁹ Mohanty argued that Third World women are labelled by their Western champions as ‘ourselves undressed’, and that there is a need for a much more specialist study of their diverse individual life situations. ‘Under Western Eyes’, p 200

Storytelling and Allegory

African literature is densely populated with portraits of women written by men and feminist literary critics have categorised many of them as demeaning stereotypes. Ogun-dipe-Leslie identified the Sweet Mother, the fertile Mother Africa, the Houri, erotic Lover or Prostitute, the City Girl and the Rural Woman, and challenged women writers to take responsibility for countering these stereotypes and represent the reality of women's lives in their roles as writers, women, and third world people.⁹⁰ Stratton was one among many highly critical of Achebe's portrayal of submissive, even invisible, women in his earlier novels though she seems to support the use of the victim archetypes portrayed by Emecheta, another insider outsider.⁹¹ In his critique of the 'white man's image of the non-white,' Mphahlele lists another range of types portrayed by white authors; Savages brutal and noble, the Degenerate, Children of the wasteland, the Migrant, the Man with a halo, the Menacing servants, the Rebel and the Aspiring Zulu.⁹² McCall Smith, as a white European male writing about Africans therefore has more than one minefield to negotiate in the Botswana novels. He has taken a very different starting point from other white authors since all his protagonists are black, with a generation of independence and uninterrupted land ownership behind them and the relationships portrayed are between equals of both genders, with no institutionalised imbalance of power. The characters are utterly confident in their own skin and culture and especially in their Batswana identity. Though he is writing in and commenting on, the post colony, there are very few white characters and none of the conventional issues of imperial confrontation. There is no white creation of black 'otherness,' if anything it is white character and culture that are othered, and the reader is invited to identify totally with Mma Ramotswe, Mr J.L.B. Matekoni and their world-views. But though subverting assumptions and based on McCall Smith's observation and inclusion of Batswana reality, it could be argued that his characters and his women in particular represent another set of stereotypes.

Mma Ramotswe is a Mother Africa in the Negritude tradition. Her very name is from the map of Botswana,⁹³ and as he summons the courage to propose to her for the second time Mr J.L.B. Matekoni spells out her significance.

'He looked at her in the darkness, at this woman who was everything to him – mother, Africa, wisdom, understanding, good things to eat, pumpkins, chicken, the smell of sweet cattle breath, the white sky across the endless endless bush, and the

⁹⁰ Ogun-dipe – Leslie, 'The Female Writer and her Commitment'

⁹¹ *African Literature and the Politics of Gender* pp 22-38 and *The Shallow Grave*, pp95-113

⁹² Mphahlele, *The African Image*, pp101-165

⁹³ Ramotswa, on the border with South Africa, near Mochudi, Precious' literary birthpalace.

giraffe that cried giving its tears for women to daub on their baskets; O Botswana, my country, my place.’ (*NoI*:232)

She is however a subversive Mother Africa, being an independent woman, with a less than perfect figure. McCall Smith has been complimented by women readers for the positive connotations of his innovative term ‘traditional build’, but he uses it with increasing comic frequency, coming close to constructing that patronising British stereotype, the ‘fat jolly resourceful black woman’ who can manage any situation. The honouring of African women in the text also has the adverse effect of presenting the men as negative stereotypes. Though there are the honourable exceptions already mentioned, Note Makote is abusive and cruel, Happy Bapetsi’s ‘father’ is feckless, lazy and exploiting, the garage apprentices only care about looking at girls, in the flesh or in magazines and men in general are not to be trusted. Against this background the women appear more differentiated and convincing. Mma Makutsi is caring and dutiful, but also rebellious, ambitious and creative, but she is still representative of a type, though not necessarily an African type, as her creator acknowledges.

‘In a sense I’m trying to say something about universal truths which crop up in the lives of my characters. Mma Makutsi, for example, with her 97% from the Botswana Secretarial College, represents all those people who don’t get what they deserve.’⁹⁴

He seems here to acknowledge that his characters are allegorical types, instructors with a universal message for all readers. Mma Ramotswe can be seen to represent the spirit of forgiveness and the confident modern (African) woman; her father Obed represents hard work and sacrifice, an older generation displaced in Africa by the migrant labour system; Mr J.L.B. Matekoni represents all that is traditional, modest, hardworking and honourable, and the guilt for past wrongs is a symptom of his depression; Mma Potokwane and Dr Moffat represent caring and duty for the underprivileged; and on the negative side, Note Makoti represents abusive men; Mma Makutsi’s dying brother represents victims of the AIDS pandemic and the ‘sullen bad maid’ represents internal racism in Botswana against the Masarwa. The hypothesis of the characters as representative types rather than distinct individuals is supported by the fact that though they have a wide variety of life circumstances, the style of their voices, certainly those of the main protagonists, is not greatly differentiated in dialogue or sentiment and the authorial voice can be clearly heard. Indeed all the characters are conduits for the author’s message.

‘That understanding, thought Mma Ramotswe, was the beginning of all morality. If you knew how a person was feeling... then surely it would be impossible to inflict further pain,’ (*MBG*:75)

has exactly the same tone and feel as:

⁹⁴ Small home, ‘The Heart of Africa’, p28

‘It was absolutely correct [reflected Mma Makutsi], of course those who did wrong had been wronged themselves- that very much accorded with her own experience.’

(*MBG:174*)

The characters, and their relationships with each other do not really develop in depth from the framework laid down in the first novel as the series progresses, but the use of allegory to educate the reader is a fundamental part of McCall Smith’s storytelling technique.

According to Benjamin:

‘the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly.’⁹⁵

He hypothesised that that the experience of modernity, the loss of the time to read aloud and to listen while performing a task, in particular the impact of industrialization and of global war, have heightened the value of news at the expense of communicable experience. In his view the essence of a story is that it ‘concentrates its strength and can release it even after a long time,’ whereas information does not survive the moment in which it was new.

McCall Smith’s Botswana, though specific and modern, is also ancient and timeless, and his use of allegorical types, exploring universal truths within this setting, is in the African story telling tradition and clearly values personal experience and wisdom. Benjamin identified two archetypal embodiments of the storyteller, ‘the resident tiller of the soil, and the trading seaman,’ the insider and the outsider, the man who has stayed at home and the traveller from afar. As a traveller from afar and an outsider, McCall Smith has in these novels attempted to give voice to the experience of those insiders who have stayed at home and thus ‘combine the lore of faraway places...with the lore of the past as it best reveals itself to the natives of a place.’ He has also managed to subvert the novel form, which Benjamin saw as the symptom of the decline of the art, by using it for modern storytelling. Though having a dominant protagonist, his stories, as I have demonstrated, feature ‘many diffuse occurrences as opposed to one hero, one odyssey, one battle.’ Benjamin’s other criterion is that ‘every real story contains overtly or covertly, something useful. ...[this] may consist in a moral, some useful practical advice, or in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers.’ This is most certainly met in the wide range of wisdom and insights that McCall Smith offers, via his characters, on manners, morals, life and relationships. He interrogates the clash of tradition and modernity identified by Benjamin, and a major strategy for this is his use of the detective genre.

⁹⁵ Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, pp 83,84,86,90 and 98