

Chapter 5 ~Prolonging the Colonial Gaze

'I happened to be brought up ... in the country called Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, an entrancingly beautiful land with a past full of pain. During the first half of the twentieth century it was run as a self governing colony under the Union Jack, but presided over by a smallish group of predominantly British settlers... The distorted nature of that small town society, with all its pettiness, takes a long time to get over... Such societies were a mixture of well meaning paternalism and gross, insensitive cruelty. They were in some respects monstrously unjust, although the injustice would not always strike those who lived there at the time. It often comes home later, when one realises just how great was the colonial imposition on sub-Saharan Africa and just what strutting arrogance it had involved. But of course one has to temper that judgement with assessment of the post-colonial African state which in many cases has been a nightmare...And now the moral question which we have to face is how far we draw a line over the brutality of the past or how far we continue to strip it bare and examine it...At what point should the wrongs of the past be consigned to the past and no longer acted upon?It is a theme which I have subsequently myself tried to deal with in a number of my novels, including the Mma Ramotswa novels. She is a forgiving person and forgiveness comes to the fore in her resolution of many of the issues which are brought to her. And forgiveness, I think, is very much an everyday problem for people. It is not easy to practice, and I am no better at it than the next person, but we need to remind ourselves of it, particularly in a society in which vindictive levels of blame and retribution seem to be hovering on the sidelines, ready for their comeback.'

McCall Smith, 'A portrait of the writer', *The Scotsman*, 20 September 2004, p2-3

In this study, I have interrogated McCall Smith's storytelling in his Botswana novels from a variety of perspectives; whether or not they are African literature; whether his Botswana is 'real' or invented; whether his characters are individual portraits or allegorical types; whether his heroine is a detective or an agent of restoration. Each of these perspectives has revealed evidence that his overarching message is one of the value of tradition, of manners and of forgiveness, within Africa but also universally. I have also interrogated the subversions, contradictions and ambivalence that inevitably arise from his positions of both closeness and distance; a European outsider, yet writing about Africa as an insider, 'writing back' to the Empire, but from the centre. In his essay quoted above, he clearly reveals his personal knowledge and understanding of the colonial experience in 'Rhodesia,' something of the impact this has had on him, and his underlying motivation for these stories.

It also sheds light on his elective silences. In spite of, no doubt because of, and perhaps as a gesture of reparation for, his personal experience of the impact of British colonization, he has chosen not to write about the violent history and troubled present of Zimbabwe. His philosophy of dealing with past wrongs through forgiveness takes him in a very different direction from other authors, for example Alexandra Fuller, in her exploration of her ‘Rhodesian’ past.

‘Far from being a story of reconciliation and understanding, this ended up being a story about what happens when you stand on tiptoe and look too hard into your own past and into the things that make us war-wounded the fragile, haunted, powerful men-women that we are...It’s more than a body can take.’¹³²

McCall Smith has chosen to feature instead, the other African country of his experience, a country which has *not* been a site of ongoing racial conflict, civil or tribal war, genocide, economic collapse or overt corruption in the post-colony, indeed a country that has achieved its position primarily by being a ‘great swathe of territory which the British really had not known what to do with, [that] had prospered to become the best-run state in Africa by far.’ (*No1:150*) In spite of the ‘troubled adolescence the continent had experienced, with its vainglorious dictators and corrupt bureaucracies,’ (*TG:196*) he promotes the necessity of African independence and self-sufficiency as opposed to a continuing neo-colonial dependency culture still dominated by ‘the West.’ Mma Ramotswe is deeply ‘proud of Seretse Khama who invented a new country out of a place that had been ignored by the British...’ (*MBG:26*) Where his detective-genre predecessor Conan Doyle was a committed apologist of Empire, writing clearly from the supposed cultural centre in which all foreigners were ‘othered’ as unfathomable exotics,¹³³ McCall Smith writes through the consciousness of the colonised other, and by his use of subversive and positive black stereotypes challenges the negative representations of colonial allegory.¹³⁴ He clearly believes that although;

‘there was always some eager foreign organization ready to say to Africans, this is what you do... this is how you should do things...yet somehow it could be tiring to be given advice...Africa needed its own solutions.’ (*TG:91*)

But because Mma Ramotswe is the personification of the author’s philosophy of forgiveness, the point is made in a gentle, reconciliatory way, following in the footsteps of her heroes Seretse Khama and Mr Mandela. The contrast between a white male outsider and a genuine black woman insider’s view is brought into stark relief by the fiction of Unity Dow, who

¹³² Fuller, *Scribbling the Cat*, p251

¹³³ Thompson, *Fiction, Crime and Empire*, p69

¹³⁴ Ashcroft et al, *Post Colonial Studies*, p9

though not yet nearly so accomplished a storyteller as McCall Smith, shares his legal background and local experience. She is a high court judge deeply involved in campaigning against woman and child abuse in Botswana.¹³⁵ Amantle Bokaa, the amateur lady detective heroine of *The Screaming of the Innocent*, inhabits the same fictional genre and geographical terrain as Mma Ramotswa, and investigates a similar case child disappearance. But hers is a very different and much darker Botswana, with more overt child and woman abuse, damaging traditional practices and a powerful but corrupt coalition of male police, government officials and traditional chiefs, where the child victim does not escape, as he does in McCall Smith's story but has been violently killed. The resolution of the novel is uncertain and pessimistic with Amantle angry and distressed that the powerful abusers have not been caught, and the only gesture of reparation is the suicide of an old, sick perpetrator.¹³⁶

Dow's heroine is overtly antagonistic to the impact of colonization, her Setswana name identifies her with the struggle, and she deeply resents her enforced English school name,¹³⁷ something that 'Precious', though avoiding the issue by formality of address, does not positively challenge. Mma Ramotswa does refer to the fight against racism and oppression, indeed the ethical dilemma of whether the means justify the ends that permeates the books could be seen to relate to that struggle. She equates her blackmail of Dr Ranta with 'wars which were just wars. Africa had been forced to liberate herself, and nobody said that it was wrong to use force to achieve that result.' (*TG:204*) She also acknowledges that 'Africa has these problems now. We have to try to cope with them,' (*TG:211*) but as has been demonstrated, the references to the problems that exist even in the positive setting of Botswana are minimised, along with the violence. This has the subtle effect of also minimising the violence of the colonial encounter, by focussing on the one country that has successfully survived it and this picture has not changed as McCall Smith has had the opportunity of exposure to a wider audience due to his huge international success.

Bartlett¹³⁸ argues convincingly that although McCall Smith has not misrepresented Africa or Botswana, the 'Western', American audience;

'feels it can get to grips with [his]Africa because it affirms their own humanity...

It is too easy to extrapolate from Botswana to homogenous Africa...and the blurring of Botswana with Africa, of Africa with black people, has turned the books into an American success.'

¹³⁵ Botswana Daily News, 'Child Protection a must', p1

¹³⁶ Dow, *The Screaming of the Innocent*, p215

¹³⁷ Dow, op.cit., p32 and Andersson, 'Watching the Detectives', p5

¹³⁸ Bartlett, 'A woman who...', p2-3

He acknowledges that McCall Smith writes passionately, not patronisingly of Africa, but that he has nevertheless created;

‘the Africa of Western idealism...which allows readers who view Africa as a homogenous place to affirm their own ideas of what Africanness is. This concept of Africa ...is not threatening, it is not a place of myriad ethnicities and countries and religions and dilemmas and poverty and diseases. It is an Africa of human interaction and understanding, of compassion that is not enforced or artificial.’

Mma Ramotswe exemplifies this as she reflects that ‘Mr Mandela’s’ forgiveness:

‘was the real African way, the tradition that was closest to the heart of Africa. We are all children of Africa, and none of us is better or more important than the other. This is what Africa could say to the world: it could remind it what it is to be human.’ (TG:60)

Movingly written, without doubt genuinely felt by the author and based on historical reality this is still uncomfortably close to a sentimental interpretation of ‘ubuntu.’ Mrs Curtin says:

‘Everything about my own country seemed so shoddy and superficial when held up against what I saw in Africa. People suffered here and many of them had very little, but they had this wonderful feeling for others...’ (TG:27)

and the implication, intended or not, is that it is somehow acceptable for Africans to remain in poverty because they are easily satisfied, non-materialistic, resourceful, and forgiving, and African life philosophy is superior to that of ‘the West.’ When Mma Ramotswe further reflects that:

‘Mr Verwoerd had his people, and perhaps not all of his people were bad. ...Perhaps they now understood the wrong they had done; even if they did not they had been forgiven for the most part. The ordinary people tended not to have room in their hearts for hatred.’ (MBG:74)

she and by implication the author, appropriates and over-simplifies the complexity and pain of the Truth and Reconciliation process and minimises the impact of apartheid, in the same way as the violence of the colonial project has been minimised. Mma Ramotswe’s - not historically inaccurate - opinion that:

‘Slavery had been a great wrong perpetrated against Africa, but there had always been willing African slavers who sold their own people, and there were still vast legions of Africans working in conditions of near slavery ...quiet people, weak people, and the domestic servants were among them.’ (MBG:73)

enables her also to reveal ‘Botswana’s dark secret - this exploitation - which nobody liked to talk about. Certainly nobody liked to talk about how the Masarwa had been treated as slaves...’ (MBG:73)

The author's highlighting of internal African oppression against a corresponding lack of emphasis about the 'Western' market for slaves, by implication balances and justifies the history of exploitation by 'the West.'

The universal resonance and comfort of Mma Ramotswe's forgiving approach to life and her conviction that 'there were many wrongs in the past, but did it help to keep bringing them up and giving them a fresh airing?' (*TG*:59) is on the one hand positive, constructive and healing. The fact that this supposed insider African view is actually written by an outsider, means, on the other hand, that its author takes responsibility for sanitising and minimising the violence and oppression of black African history as part of his healing mission. This enables his 'Western' readers to create Africa as they would wish it to be, a manageable modern construction of Africa, 'dealing with it' in Said's words:

'by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.'¹³⁹

'The 'problem in moral philosophy' as Mma Ramotswe might put it, (*TG*:122) is that a white European author is not really in a position to promote healing and forgiveness on behalf and through the consciousness of, the people of Botswana, or the people of the Africa this book has come to represent. Due to the resonance his 'fireside tales' have in a modern 'Western' world anxious for the security and certainty of a more humane, ordered universe where right prevails, McCall Smith is writing increasingly successfully for the American commercial market. Despite the many co-incidences between their works, Bessie Head had a much darker and more pessimistic view of life, and probably as a result, much less commercial success. Returning to Head's essay *The Old Iron Cooking Pot of Europe*, that has inspired the title of this study, McCall Smith has given good account of 'the concerns of black people and their day to day survival', but in so doing he has largely overlooked 'a desolate history of moans, lamentations and wars' in order to privilege a 'Western' view of the 'wonder and communication' of Africa.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, p 3

¹⁴⁰ Head, 'The Old Iron Cooking Pot of Europe', p7