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‘The Old Iron Cooking Pot of Europe’ Storytelling, Sleuthing and Neo-colonialism in the Botswana novels of Alexander McCall Smith

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Chapter 1 ~'What has Literature got to do with it?' [8]

> *' "The whole thing has taken me so much by surprise; it's extraordinary. Not in my wildest dreams did I imagine what would happen when I wrote the first book. I have been swept off my feet." McCall Smith is too humble to consider his books African Literature but acknowledges that they are also not quite European Literature. "They are different maybe, from the typical novel where you have the Western gaze turned on Africa, either very condescending stuff, or written purely about Europeans themselves and their adventures in Africa." These books are written as if from the inside of Africa from an African perspective.'*
> McCall Smith in Mandi Smallhorne, 'The Heart of Africa', p28

In a forthcoming volume on *African Literature in English*, Attwell writes that 'Questions of boundary definition and entitlement to the term 'African' have been a feature of literary scholarship and the criticism it has produced on the continent since at least the sixties.' [9] Indeed Achebe, whose rational and humorous approach was helpful during these early debates, recounts the enormous difficulty experienced by African writers themselves in defining this literature at Makerere in 1962 and says that in the end they gave up! [10]
There are highly complex issues of geography and linguistic integrity, colour, diversity and representivity to be debated and resolved in such a problematic enterprise. Some definitions of African Literature see the use of African Languages as essential, while others do not. In his overview, Attwell notes that 'the central current in efforts over the past two decades in Southern African literary historiography is directed against the very idea of a single language literary history.' [11] He highlights Chapman's attempt to write a common literary narrative embracing indigenous and colonising languages, monumental in scope,[12] which was still adversely criticised for not taking enough account of the histories of the constituent parts, and where the author along with others on a similar mission, in de Kock's words 'apologise for attempting to do the impossible and then go ahead anyway.'[13] Attwell himself seems to support van Wyk Smith's view that it is not possible to compile a meaningful composite multi-language history due to the lack of interest and acknowledgement of influence authors in different language traditions have given each other.[14]

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[8] The title of an essay by Achebe in *Hopes and Impediments*
[9] Attwell, 'African Literature', p1 (chapter awaiting publication)
[10] Achebe 'The African Writer and the English language', in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p90
[11] Attwell, 'African Literature', p2
[12] Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*
[13] de Kock, 'South Africa in the Global Imaginary', p263
[14] van Wyk Smith, 'White Writing…', p78

The critical debate has therefore developed a range of different emphases, from that represented by Ngugi's passionate, yet perhaps ultimately impractical and self-defeating plea for an African Literature written only in indigenous languages,[15] to a discourse which values the diversity of that potential literature. As Chapman says 'despite his desire to write in Kikuyu, Ngugi, in order to remain 'popular', (in sales) to an adult as opposed to a school readership is compelled to 'translate' his fiction into English.'[16] It is not particularly helpful to rehearse 'the language debate' further here, but rather to consider whether books written by an African born writer, albeit a white Scot, with a completely African setting and protagonist, qualify as African literature under any of the existing definitions. Chinweizu and 'the troika' were unequivocal on this point when they wrote in 1985 that 'one drop of black blood makes you one of us',[17] so McCall Smith would presumably not be included!

His inclusion would be possible according to the problematic Fourah Bay College definition of 1963; 'Creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral.'[18] Nkosi made the point that this definition is scarcely useful as it 'would include within its compass both Chinua Achebe and a Danish Baroness…' [19] More specific about viewpoint but equally broad and inclusive is Gordimer's 1973 attempt, '…African writing is writing done in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour who share the African experience and who share with Africans the experience of having been shaped, mentally and physically, by Africa rather than anywhere else in the world. One must look at the world from Africa, to be an African writer, not look upon Africa from the world.'[20] Her stance is regarded as highly problematic by van Wyk Smith, who sees her lack of acknowledgement of any other than English language influences as creating an isolationist 'one woman system'.[21]

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[15] Ngugi, 'The Language of African Literature.'
[16] Chapman, *African Popular Fiction*, p115
[17] Chinweizu at al, *The Decolonisation of African Literature*, p6
[18] Wastberg, 'The Writer in Modern Africa', p10
[19] Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, p7
[20] Gordimer, *The Black Interpreters*, p1. In 'Turning the Page' in *Living in Hope and History*, pp 32-36 Gordimer later argued cogently for the need for publishing in indigenous languages side by side with those acquired from Europe.
[21] van Wyk Smith, 'White Writing…', p80

Gray set out the dilemmas of defining Southern African literature in 1979 when he wrote:

> 'Calling a body of work a literature implies that it has a distinctness, a certain completeness, so that it may be isolated from other literatures for independent scrutiny, and assumed to have certain internal cross references which give it a unique cohesion.'[22]

He made the fundamental point that the countries of Southern Africa, themselves constructs of the West, were never either intra- or inter-continentally, part of a closed system. There was a range both of languages and cultural influences before and after the colonial enterprise and the settler populations in the countries of Southern Africa who regard themselves as indigenous, makes the situation much more complex. His concept of Southern African literature as an 'archipelago', of distinct but linked histories, related to the adjacent landmasses of English literature, Commonwealth literature and the continent of Africa which gives it its actual nourishment, is both imaginative and helpful and has, according to Attwell, never been seriously questioned.[23] McCall Smith's work could be legitimately sited as an island within this archipelago, as he has drawn nourishment from the continent of Africa in the sense of his own birth and childhood, and the inspiration and content of these novels. He has drawn on his own extensive reading in many inter-textual references and literary jokes and he demonstrates his knowledge of and relationship to work from England, the Commonwealth and the African continent. The opening line of the first novel; 'Mma Ramotswe had a detective agency in Africa, at the foot of Kgale Hill' *(No1:1)* is a mischievous reference to *Out of Africa.* [24] One of the first cases she solves by finding a dead man's pocket watch in a crocodile, which will be familiar to anyone who knows Peter Pan! McCall Smith was clearly familiar with the colonial romance tradition of Haggard and identified the distinctive mountain landscape he saw in Swaziland to the setting of King Solomon's Mines.[25] He does however explicitly reject the tradition depicting white adventurers in Africa, and thus creates the major subversion underlying these novels where all the protagonists are black Africans and their adventures are gentle and non-invasive.

Though writing in English and from outside Africa, he has, in van Wyk's terms, both been influenced by but also acknowledged African oral tradition. With his insider experience, McCall Smith is seen by Western critics as 'translating' or interpreting across a boundary from one culture to another with knowledge and authority.

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[22] Gray, *Southern African Literature,* p14
[23] Attwell 'African Literature', p5
[24] 'I had a farm in Africa at the foot of the Ngong Hills.' Blixen, *Out of Africa*, p13
[25] McCall Smith, 'How I became a writer', p2

Becker writes that 'from the opening line… it's clear that he's familiar enough with Southern Africa to put a playful spin on most Western reader's assumptions'[26] and Bartlett considers that 'Africa is introduced as friend rather than stranger, thanks to a narrator who is not anthropological spectator but rather participant.'[27] Gray maintained that the Southern African literature system:

> '… does have some norms peculiar to it …the writer is always forced into a position of having to negotiate between extremes, in crossing the language – colour barrier; he or she can only be a syncretist and hybridiser. And therefore the basic act of writing is one of carrying information across one or other socio-political barrier, literally of trading – and that is probably the writer's source of greatness …the writer exists at any of several boundaries (*not* at the centre of one enclosed group); his or her act of making literature is part of transferring data across that boundary, from one audience to another – an act which in the broadest sense may be termed 'translation'.[28]

In contemporary discourse therefore, it is the boundaries or frontiers themselves that have become the object of scrutiny and the permeating focus of this study is how McCall Smith negotiates that frontier.

According to McCall Smith, 'If you want to know about a writer, and about what really makes him or her tick, then simply look at the books. There's a lot to be found out there…' [29] In one of Mma Ramotswe's cases he embodies 'the Western' and maybe his own, love affair with Africa and imagines the possibility of an outsider moving meaningfully across that frontier.

> ' "Your son is learning quickly," Mr Nogana said to me …going over Setswana grammar with him and giving him the words for everything they saw: the plants in the garden, the clouds in the sky, the birds. "He has got an African heart within him. I am just teaching that heart to speak." ' *(TG:28)*

But crossing the frontier is not ultimately possible and the American boy who so loves Africa dies as a result of his inexperience in relationships with two of its people and his lack of knowledge of its terrain. Those who survive are the insiders, both black and white.

[26] Becker, 'The Miss Marple of Botswana', p2
[27] Bartlett, 'A woman who also…', p1
[28] Gray*, Some Problems of Writing Historiography in Southern Africa* (1989) pp 20 – 21 quoted in Attwell, 'African Literature', p6
[29] McCall Smith, 'A Portrait of the writer', p1

Through Mma Ramotswe, of whom McCall Smith says 'she and I agree 100% on many matters', [30] he achieves a double insider / outsider subversion when she browses in the Gabarone Book Centre.

> 'She loved magazines. She loved their smell and their bright pictures. She loved interior design magazines, which showed how people lived in far away countries. They had so much in their houses…paintings, rich curtains, piles of velvet cushions that would have been wonderful for a fat person to sit on…'*(No1:136)*

Whilst he may simply be stating the male viewpoint that all women like decorating and cushions in particular, he also contrives to 'other' the West by making it exotic through African eyes, to critique Western materialism through her admiration and to convey her lack of material possessions.

In other instances where his insider / outsider stance is more ambiguous. Mma Ramotswe muses that :

> 'These Mercedes-Benz cars have not been a good thing for Africa. They are very fine cars I believe, but all the ambitious people in Africa want one before they have earned it. That has made for big problems.' *(TG:124)*

Whilst this is an opinion commonly expressed, and could be seen to be supremely 'African' in that it shows a working woman criticising the ruling elite, it also reinforces a 'Western' stereotype of African corruption in the post-colonial period. There are other occasions when the carefully created illusion of seeing the world through African eyes disappears in more complex forms of expression. Would the admirable Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, really reflect on a 'noumenal' evening with Mma Ramotswe; is the term 'garagiste' the most appropriate for the finest mechanic in Botswana; would Mma Ramotswe tell her enthusiastic assistant:

> 'You have broken the glass ceiling that stops secretaries from reaching their full potential.'

and would Mma Makutsi in response look up at:

> 'the familiar ceiling boards, fly tracked and buckling from the heat' and feel that '…the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel itself could not at that moment have been more glorious in her eyes, more filled with hope and joy.'? *(TG:2.186.114)*

These could be authorial slips, or a humorous reminder of the outsider who is writing.

[30] Blake, 'My first novel…', *S A Woman and Home,* p150

Chapman seemed to re-visit Gordimer's earlier position on African Literature and positively value the outsider perspective when he wrote:

> 'Given that the literature continues to be marked by a to-and-fro between Africa and Europe not only in terms of language, literary conventions and critical debate, but that some of the most penetrating insights have been offered by sojourners or commentators from abroad, the qualification for being a South African writer or a Zimbabwean writer or, generally a writer of Southern Africa, would seem to have less to do with birth , nationality or race than with intimate knowledge of and close identification with the life of the region. At least, this is how I have chosen to regard the matter.'[31]

This argument, together with Gray's archipelago concept encourages a more interactive and complex view. Whilst there are inevitably problems with 'an African perspective' written by an outsider, however knowledgeable and positively inclined, McCall Smith is one part of a very long process of influence and counter influence between Africa and 'the West.'
It is perhaps therefore most helpful at this point to regard his writing as 'hybrid', as construed by Bhabha, existing in that interdependent, contradictory, ambivalent 'Third Space of enunciation …which has a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory …may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture…'[32] Bakhtin suggests that every genre is a synthesis of older ones, [33] and these novels are also hybrid in the Bakhtinian sense of combining pre-existing genres drawn from high or low culture. In her comparative study of four authors of detective fiction in post-colonial Africa, Andersson questions whether the detective genre in Africa is itself a hybrid between elite and popular literature.[34]

Critics have variously commented of McCall Smith's novels that they 'have the virtues both of the fairy tale and of social realism, a very difficult literary feat to pull off convincingly',[35] and that McCall Smith 'has spawned a best seller because he has written a popular psychology book as much as he has written a mystery.' [36]

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[31] Chapman, 'Writing Literary History in S Africa', p 47
[32] Bhabha *The Location of Culture* pp 37-38 quoted in Ashcroft et al *Post Colonial Studies*, pp118-9
[33] Bakhtin defines the novel as a super genre, 'whose power exists in its ability to engulf and ingest all other genres, or conversely as not a genre at all.' *The Dialogic Imagination pp xxix*
[34] In her paper 'Watching the Detectives', Andersson quotes Priebe's view that in elite or canonical literature we see a hero in a disordered world, whereas in popular literature we see a healthy well ordered world threatened by a villain. pp1-2
[35] Daniels, 'Agent for Good', p1
[36] Bartlett,' A woman who also…', p3

> 'The books are hard to define. They are not detective fiction, although they revolve around a detective agency; they are not African literature, although their voice is African; they are not romantic fiction, although there is romance woven through them; they are not comedy, although they will make you laugh out loud.' [37]

These subversive cross-pollinations will be discussed further in Chapters 3 and 4, but bearing in mind Achebe's wise advice that '…all this hankering after definitions may in the end prove worse than futile by creating needless anxieties. For as everyone knows anxiety can hinder performance from sex to science.' [38]

At the start of this chapter, it seemed to me that the Botswana novels could not in any way be seen to be 'African from the inside' as claimed by the enthusiastic *Skylife* interviewer. McCall Smith, on another occasion answered the highly debateable question as to whether he saw himself 'within the tradition of the classic African novel of writers like Isaac Dinesen and Chinua Achebe' by saying:

> 'I think these books might be difficult to put into any particular tradition. They are obviously about Africa, but they are very different from the works you mention.'[39]

Nkosi theorised a division of African authors into two groups, those who looked at African society as a fixed and unchanging ' mask' and those who saw the function of writing as carrying out social 'tasks.' I will now consider whether McCall Smith has achieved a skilful synthesis of these 'tasks and masks' in his re-invention of Botswana for his Western readers.

[37] Smallhorne, 'The Heart of Africa', p28
[38] Achebe, 'Thoughts on the African Novel' in *Morning Yet on Creation Day,* p90
[39] McCall Smith, Interview on *Bookbrowse.com*