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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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Introduction

> *'I had always associated the tripod, the open outdoor fireplace and its simple humility, with the lives of black people. It never occurred to me that the cooking pot was an imported item and had at some stage in history travelled thousands of miles over oceans to become an indispensable part of African homesteads.'*
> Bessie Head, 'The Old Iron Cooking Pot of Europe' in *Lip from Southern African Women*, p5

The title of this study is respectfully borrowed from Bessie Head's essay, and refers to the 'remarkable' round-bellied, three-legged black iron cooking pot that is to be found in every hearth and home in rural Botswana and throughout much of Southern Africa.
Head describes her surprise when she discovers on a trip to Europe that this cooking pot in fact probably came via Holland to Africa and has been completely appropriated.
She uses this as a starting point for a reflection on the European influence on African life and language, on the long standing interconnectedness between peoples and the fact that the meeting of cultures in Southern Africa during the colonial period 'did not inspire wonder and communication between black and white. It produced a desolate history of moans, lamentations and wars. For a long while the concerns of black people and their day to day survival were of little account.'[1] It seems appropriate therefore to use Head's reflection as the starting point for this analysis of a series of novels about the day-to-day lives and survival of black people in Botswana, which has also been imported from Europe and which clearly draws on Head's work.

Alexander McCall Smith, the author who is the subject of this study, was born in 'Southern Rhodesia', to Scottish / Rhodesian parents, but has lived in Edinburgh, Scotland, for most of his adult life, though he has worked in and still regularly visits Botswana. He is a Professor of Medical Law and Ethics, 'a compulsive writer' and the prolific author of over 50 volumes including children's fiction and legal and medical books as well as the Botswana novels. He has also published two collections of African stories. The first Botswana novel, featuring Mma Precious Ramotswe, a lady detective of 'traditional build', was originally published modestly in Scotland in 1998 to limited critical attention. The series has however become a multi-national publishing phenomenon since being taken over by a major American house and over 6 million copies in the English language have now been sold.

[1] Head, 'The Old Iron Cooking Pot…' pp5-6

The author has won many awards including Author of the Year at Waterstone's (UK) Bookshop, and the British Book Awards, the SAGA Award for Wit and the Crime Writers Association's Dagger! [2] He was recently described as 'the man who opened the world's eyes to the wonder of Africa's people.' [3]

As a researcher I am aware that I have been drawn to this particular investigation by the fact that my own situation mirrors some of the ambivalence and contradictions that will be seen to emerge in this study. A historian and social worker / teacher by education and career, I have a special interest in the relationship between history and literature. I am involved professionally in social development and in work with 'ordinary people', especially 'ordinary', indeed 'extraordinary' women, as they manage the daily challenges of their lives in South Africa and some of McCall Smith's comments have both interrogated and illuminated my working life.

In the six years I have lived in South Africa, in addition to studying African literature formally for the last two years, I have read a great deal of non-fiction and travel writing about the region. I have developed a great interest in the history of the land and the literature that arises from the relationship writers have with the landscape. As an incomer from a 'civilising' former colonial power myself, I am very aware of the European, especially the British, ambivalent love affair with Africa, its land and people, indeed McCall Smith's books have been described as a love poem to Botswana. He uses this specific setting to comment on social and ethical issues, on universal values, on human nature and relationships. He is a consummate storyteller, and has created an African woman and an African society to which people in the West feel they can relate intimately and he has achieved greater commercial success and international critical acclaim than black African authors Bessie Head and Unity Dow who have both also written about ordinary people in Botswana.

McCall Smith has already written six novels in the Botswana series. Eight have been commissioned and there is a television film series on the way, but this study will focus on the first three [4] as they provide sufficient evidence for analysis and debate. I will also refer to McCall Smith's recently published collection of African stories [5] and his latest detective novel, again to be part of a series, set in the author's home territory of Edinburgh, Scotland rather than Botswana. [6]

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[2] *The Scotsman,* 8 April, 10 June, 10 November and 23 November 2004
[3] Smallhorne, 'The heart of Africa', p26
[4] McCall Smith, *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, *Tears of the Giraffe*, *Morality for Beautiful Girls* These will be referenced in the text hereafter as *No 1, TG, and MBG.*
[5] McCall Smith, *The Girl who Married a Lion* which will be referenced as *GML*
[6] McCall Smith, *The Sunday Philosophy Club* which will be referenced as *SPC*

Though McCall Smith's books are 'popular' literature in every sense of the word, still high in the bestseller lists and widely and favourably reviewed, I have found little in-depth critical analysis. In this study therefore, I will interrogate some of the issues raised by the fact that these engaging and uplifting 'traditional' stories about a black African woman in a developing society, which have convinced Western readers and critics that they are seeing 'the real Africa', are written by an author who, despite his African upbringing and experience, is a white European man, in a position of privilege. In so doing I will use these contemporary texts to examine and reflect on some of the complexities and ambivalence of the literary relationship between Africa and 'the West' in an increasingly global context.
These novels have been widely promoted as African Literature and in *Chapter I ~ 'What has literature got to do with it?'* I will summarise some of the debates on African literature and discuss whether this is where they should be sited. I will also begin to examine the implications and contradictions created by this author being an 'insider / outsider', a stance which is translated into a series of literary strategies of closeness and distance. These strategies will be examined in relation to the themes of all the subsequent chapters.

The author has drawn on his insider experience of living in 'Rhodesia' and Botswana as well as his knowledge of African colonial history to assist him, now an outsider, in creating a vivid and convincing picture of a distant and different society for other outsiders. He has struck an emotional chord for English and especially American readers, who are probably mostly not familiar with Botswana. In *Chapter 2 ~ ' My Invented Country',* I will examine how he has negotiated the interface between history and literature, 'fact and fiction' to create this picture of Botswana and focus on his strategies for 'the invention of tradition'. Making reference to the history and current status of Botswana, I will demonstrate how 'authentic' historical events and 'real' people are incorporated into these novels to add depth to the atmosphere, to instruct the reader and demonstrate the problems, but mainly the virtues of Botswana.

'Who is there to write down the lives of ordinary people?' asks Mma Ramotswe *(No1:13)* and in *Chapter 3 ~ 'The Lives of Ordinary People'* this study will focus on the author as storyteller and self-styled recorder of ordinary lives. I will highlight his use of individual character's stories as a strategy to create multiple voices and perspectives in the texts and discuss whether these are distinct and diverse voices or conduits for the authorial voice.
I will look at examples of the speech and interaction of his characters, his use of simple language and vocabulary, carefully paced 'realistic' speech and dialogue, constant repetition, reminiscence and occasional proverbs to ascertain how he incorporates 'oral tradition.'

Developing the theme of closeness and distance, I will also consider how this white male author manages to write convincingly not only through the eyes of a woman but a *black* woman and how he has created in Mma Ramotswe, a universal female role model, confidante and advisor who now has her own website where readers can consult her about their problems and matters of etiquette! [7] I will refer to the stereotypes of African women in African literature especially those written by men, making brief comparison with other relevant authors and consider whether McCall Smith's female characters collude with or subvert these stereotypes, whether they are individuals or types, indeed whether there is an allegorical reading of the text.

Once an insider now an outsider in terms of location, race and gender McCall Smith also uses strategies of both closeness and distance, of tradition and subversion, in his chosen genre. These novels are ostensibly 'Detective Fiction', but the author, who is a Professor of Medical Law and Ethics, sees his protagonist helping clients with the general problems of their lives rather then investigating heavy end crime. In *Chapter 4 ~ 'Watching the Detectives'* I will interrogate why McCall Smith imagined her as a detective, a surprising career choice on her part, which renders her devoted father speechless on his deathbed. *(No1:4)*
I will discuss the use he makes of the detective genre, looking at the connections with two iconic British forebears, namely Sherlock Holmes and Miss Marple. I will examine how the strategy of the 'the (lady) detective in the city' enables the author to raise social issues in Botswana and to embody the encounter of tradition with modernity with the resultant nostalgia for a more ordered pre-modern world. Finally I will explore the author's use of the detective to debate ethical issues and his implicit agreement with W.H. Auden that the purpose of detective fiction is to create a perfect world.

The contradictions of insider / outsider, of closeness and distance, are also embodied in the commercial success of these books, which has happened without the author's particular intent and to his genuine surprise. Novels which honour the art of African storytelling, the return to the campfire, the wisdom and tradition of the ancestors have gained their huge popularity in 'the West', especially America, partly due to the post 9 /11 fear of international terrorism and subsequent emotional reaction to modernity, rationalization and globalization, yet this popularity has been achieved through the global mechanisms of international publishing.

[7] Bartlett, 'A woman who also…' p2

Though translated into over 30 languages across the world, these books are not yet available in Setswana and in the concluding *Chapter 5 ~ 'Prolonging the Colonial Gaze'* I will consider whether this series of novels, delightful, humorous, readable, relevant and insightful though they are, constitute a restorative writing back to the centre, albeit from the centre, or whether they constitute a continuing appropriation of African history, culture and identity, a further re-invention of Africa by 'the West' for 'the West.' I will attempt to synthesise the issues highlighted in previous chapters to ascertain whose interests are being represented and served, whether they are a positive representation of Africa to the rest of the world or a subversion in which 'the West' continues to look to Africa for solutions to its problems.

The overall challenge of this study is, without being unduly negative about writing that has brought pleasure to millions including myself, to interrogate the contradictions, subversions and silences in these texts. Is McCall Smith skilfully writing positive and affirming stories about a country he respects and loves? Is he consciously subverting the theorised coloniser / colonised relationship by featuring a country that achieved its current rising star status partly by virtue of the fact that it was never truly colonised? Is he unconsciously and perhaps inevitably, continuing the colonial literary tradition, both by minimising the violence of the African encounter with Europe and at the same time taking what Europe and America need at this point in time, namely a philosophy of courtesy, acceptance and forgiveness.