

The humanistic aspect of Alexander McCall Smith's African detective fiction

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Abstract:

The text presents some of the unusual features of Alexander McCall Smith's popular African detective stories, in which cultural elements convey humanity and thus lower tension, the characteristic sign of detective fiction. Culture, in particular the African collectivist culture included in the core of these stories, creates a milieu that enables the writer to avoid murders, which are usually basic conflict-conveying vehicles in this genre. Although McCall Smith's African books contain the conventional formal elements of detective stories, they also display a very low level of tension together with other peculiarities. This text tries to compare the structure and elements of classic detective stories with those from McCall Smith's books to disclose their true essence.

It probably sounds quite strange to write about cultural and humanistic aspects in the case of detective stories, which are usually nowadays concerned with murder. However, the pattern is different in the case of Alexander McCall Smith's books because the author's rule seems to be no murders or killing.

A former medical law professor, Alexander McCall Smith decided to change career and become a full-time writer quite late in life, at the age of 51, after achieving success with his African detective fiction, which has currently developed into a long-running series of fourteen books. Within detective fiction, these books form an uncommon group that differs from the rest of its category in many ways. To decipher the peculiarity of McCall Smith's detective stories, we have to start with the basic principles and characteristics of the genre as such.

Despite the rich tradition and popularity of detective fiction in Great Britain and all around the world, literary theorists usually ranked this genre among low literature that did not deserve to be included in the mainstream of their writing. More than a hundred years ago, G. K. Chesterton, himself the writer of detective stories, tried to advocate for the genre in person: "There is, however, between a good detective story and a bad detective story as much, or, rather

more, difference than there is between a good epic and a bad one. Not only is a detective story a perfectly legitimate form of art, but it has certain definite and real advantages as an agent of the public weal.” (2012, p.74)

However, it took some time to change the undervaluing approach of the literary authorities towards the genre:

[T]here is another important way in which our thinking about literature has been changing in the last two decades. This is the gradual assimilation into our idea of literature of popular genres that used to be sharply separated from the literary mainstream, most notably the detective story. Now, not only are certain practitioners of the detective story such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler widely included into those classroom anthologies that effectively define literary tradition, but the genre itself has achieved a new cultural centrality both in America and the world. (Cawelty, 1997, p.5)

Nowadays the detective story is respected especially among specialists in modern literature, film and culture,¹ who appreciate its qualities and find it a congenial area of study. They approach the genre by attempting to define it, e.g. G. J. Rusello:

The classic detective story is a morality play. Good, in the form of deductive reasoning and empirical observation, wins out over evil, at least to the extent of uncovering the murderer and exposing him to justice. The detective story at its best allows the full range of human motivation, from hatred and greed to a desire for redemption, to play out in limitless ways. Moreover, given the universality of human emotion, the settings for a good detective story can be just as varied, from country houses to urban offices. (2009, p.1)

To speak about this genre, one has to think about mysteries (a crime or some kind of puzzle), and the detectives who will eventually solve them, which itself implies a certain regularly repeated pattern. Yet the characteristic regularity that seems compulsory for this kind of fiction and makes the genre so different on the one hand, can, on the other hand, be a reason for its aforementioned underestimation. And there are more patterns than this one. If we look at the text of such literature, we can identify a basic structure that is implemented into such a story:

1. The crime
2. The investigation

3. The disclosure
4. The criminal's capture

Moreover, there are also certain inevitable components by which the author creates tension – the characteristic and highly required mood:

- The initial premise of the detective outline: the crime as a motif of a secret (this position of a motif as a secret determines the epic perspective of detective fiction: its aim is to tackle the problem and reveal the secret).
- Composition: a puzzle forms the core of the text – it is usually either one or several murders and a few hypotheses leading to the murderer's exposure.
- Characters: the detective and perpetrators (with some secondary characters – usually witnesses) – their personalities should be elaborated, formed by a combination of positive and negative qualities to make them fit in with the logic of their acts.

Although McCall Smith's detective fiction is presented as The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series (according to the title of its first book), compared to other detective fiction, these books immediately seem very different. Or, are these books detective stories at all? If we compare the aforementioned levels of structure, those in McCall Smith's books appear to be similar. There is always some kind of mystery or mysteries, but a real crime in the sense of its dictionary definition² is often missing. Also, the mysteries do not have the quality or are not presented with such insistence as usually keeps readers glued to their armchairs (not wanting to put the book down). For example in *Blue Shoes and Happiness* the detective is supposed to help a cook who is about to lose her job. The cook has accused her boss of stealing the best food from the school canteen in order to give it to her husband. The blackmailing of the boss by a newspaper columnist is also included in this case. Somewhere, between these problems, there emerges a mystery at an animal reserve, but the text neither informs the reader of any strange goings-on nor tries to build tension in any way, as one might expect. The whole case of the mystery is presented as an observation of a certain unhappiness felt among employees of the reserve, which is detected at the location. On account of local beliefs, the detective sees the situation as a case of witchcraft. It should be said that in these books every problem or mystery is finally solved and every crime, no matter how small, is finally punished if only by the

culprit's shame. And mysteries that might feel a little dark (but, like in the case of witchcraft, only due to the detective's first conclusion) have a very ordinary explanation – in the abovementioned case it is the superstitiousness of people who believe that hornbills bring bad luck, so they feel frightened in the presence of such a bird when it is brought to the reserve. The explanation of this mystery appears suddenly, without any previous deduction and hypothesizing; reported as if an aside, without any tension, excitement, or curiosity – those feelings that naturally accompany secrets. The significant lack of tension is another particularity of McCall Smith's stories. Tension seems rather suppressed than built by those slow-paced narratives from Gaborone in Botswana, the setting of *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency* books.

Surprisingly, compared to the abovementioned scheme of detective stories, McCall Smith's texts show most of the features characteristic for the genre. There is always some kind of crime, its investigation, disclosure and finally the culprit's capture, however, these elements are arranged in a different way than is usual in detective literature, and the result can be seen in the abovementioned lack of tension or its suppression. To start with the scheme, let us speak about the crime, which is the first and basic step of detective stories. It is inevitable to provide mystery that keeps the readers' attention until they obtain the answers to several subconscious questions, which arise immediately as this kind of conflict appears in the text: Who did it? Why did he/she do it? How did he/she do it? Alexander McCall Smith does not seem to apply the same pattern in his writing, however.

The Full Cupboard of Life starts with Precious Ramotswe (the woman detective) sitting at her desk and gazing out of the office window. The whole first chapter is about her thoughts, recollections and the morning activities of other characters in the story (Mma Makutsi, Mr J.L.B. Matekoni and his apprentices). The second chapter starts at the orphan farm, introducing Mma Potokwani and her manipulation of people (in this case of Mr J.L.B. Matekoni who is expected to perform a charity fund-raising parachute jump); in the following chapter, Mma Ramotswe goes to visit her cousin in Mochudi, so this chapter again starts with her thinking about her late father, then continues with a discussion with one of her relatives, then with her observation of traditional life in the village. She compares its slow rhythm to life in Gaborone.

A case to be solved appears in the fourth chapter, but instead of a real criminal case there is a private investigation that should help a well-off woman choose the right husband (there are two suitors but they might have material motivation). The fifth chapter introduces Mr J.L.B. Matekoni working with his apprentices in the garage. They are working on a vintage car whose repair has been botched in another garage, and they now have to work out how to tell the bad

news to its owner without hurting his feelings. The other books in this series are also written in a similar pattern, presenting Mma Ramotswe in her office drinking bush tea or thinking about life in Botswana at the beginning, and then continuing with some local or family affairs. If one expects a case for the detectives to solve, it will surely appear, but readers have to wait and meanwhile read about Botswana, its traditions, the mentality of local people and so on:

If one pressed Mma Ramotswe on the point, really pressed, she would admit that very little happened in the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. Very little in general, that was; certainly there were spikes of activity, in which suddenly there were several problems to be looked into at once. These, though, were the exception; normally the issues with which the agency was required to deal were very small ones, which were readily solved by Mma Ramotswe's simple expedient of asking somebody a direct question and getting a direct answer. (McCall Smith, 2010, p.151)

Such manners of writing bring one important fact to the surface: crime and mystery do not have their usual central position in these books. Of course, they are not missing, but only because the books are about a detective agency. Reading about the daily routine in the agency, about the characters' relationships, their everyday problems gain priority over the criminal cases that Mma Ramotswe and her assistant Mma Makutsi try to solve. Moreover, these woman detectives do not use any sophisticated methods or special equipment as one might expect. When dealing with cases, they usually perform casual everyday activities such as finding the right people and asking questions. Sometimes they have to travel to another place, make inquiries, observe the place and make conclusions, altogether nothing special.

The previous analysis might give a negative impression of McCall Smith's African detective stories, however, the fact is, that due to their popularity, these books have been translated into many languages as well as adapted for television, radio and the internet. Their bold cultural links to Africa and Botswana make them especially attractive and interesting for readers, and the author knows how to compensate for the mentioned lack of tension. To give his texts a more authentic sound, McCall Smith makes use of exoticisms: words in Setswana – the language spoken by the majority of the people of Botswana. These culturally different words appear individually included in the English textual environment, especially in the dialogues and thoughts of the characters, at places where they express courtesy and respect by which people address and greet one another, like *Mma*, *Rra*, or *dumela*, or when they represent some cultural feature (*tokolosh* – a mythical creature). Such expressions are like islands of otherness in the English sea of words that surrounds them. The author uses them carefully, just peppering the

text to increase its attractiveness. But his approach is different when dealing with cultural issues of Africa and Botswana, because the texts of these books deal more with cultural issues, with the conflict between the traditional and the new than with the detective work of the two women detectives. Mma Ramotswe herself represents the traditional values of the country and its collectivist culture.³ With her sizeable, rather obese, body and large flat feet she even physically epitomizes African womanhood. Her generous personality and pleasant manner demonstrate the traditional nature of her personality: an image that is furthermore supported by the display of her thinking about people, Africa and Botswana:

Look at Africa – there had been so much to shake one’s head over – corruption, civil wars, and the rest – but there was so much which was now better. There had been slavery in the past, and all the suffering which that had brought and there had been all the cruelties of apartheid just those few miles away over the border, but all that was now over. There had been ignorance, but now more and more people were learning to write, and were graduating from universities. Women had been held in such servitude, and now they could vote and express themselves and claim lives for themselves, even if there were still many men who did not want such things to be. These were the good things that happened and one had to remember them. (McCall Smith, 2008, p.4)

Mma Ramotswe’s thoughts spread across many pages of the books, giving readers a good opportunity to learn something about characteristic African morality, where individuals usually do not act for themselves, but work for the sake of their families, giving their countries’ welfare priority above their individual goals and respecting ancestors and authorities. These are the values of Mma Ramotswe and she confirms them by her deeds and approach to other characters as well as by her handling of cases.

There are several more characters representing the traditional (for example Mr J.L.B. Matekoni – Mma Ramotswe’s husband, or matron Mma Potokwani). Mma Makutsi, the assistant, is the character at the edge of cultures as she respects traditions but also appreciates the certain modernization that has entered into their traditional society. This aspect is skilfully demonstrated by her fancy for fashionable things, especially shoes. Owing to this passion she buys a pair of extravagant blue shoes, which neither fit her large flat feet nor match the African environment. The third group of characters are minor ones and these represent African people influenced by western culture who do not respect traditional values any more (apprentices from the garage, girls from secretarial college etc.). The interactions between these characters create

the opportunity for showing the original cultural values of Africa and Botswana and the changes that have occurred there through the westernization of the country. And via Mma Ramotswe's mouth the writer teaches his lessons of unselfishness, morality, tells his message of love and respect that people should feel to one another as it is given in the traditional African code of morality.

In the case of The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency books, there are obviously a couple of unusual things. The first is the author's approach to the detective story, but this seems acceptable with regard to the fact that these detectives' cases and activities are culturally redefined and their work is mostly counselling, which is a very traditional activity in countries with a collectivist culture. There, a respectable and unbiased person is usually invited to help with problems between arguing or otherwise estranged parties.⁴ Another unusual feature is the author himself. Considering McCall Smith's nationality,⁵ his ability to write about contemporary African people, Botswana's society, culture and traditions is outstanding. Moreover, the manner and depth with which he depicts these issues appears surprisingly realistic and this is probably why his books are popular even in Botswana, where he has been recently been receiving high public acclaim. As a former medical law professor, Alexander McCall Smith also takes this opportunity to make us contemplate our western lives and values while reading these new Scottish-African moral fables.

Endnotes:

¹ More Delamater – Prigozy, 1997

² Crime – an act committed or omitted in violation of a law forbidding or commanding it and for which punishment is imposed upon conviction. (thefreedictionary.com)

³ Briefly explained, in the collectivist culture, which spreads across Asian and Arab areas as well as some parts of Africa, the goals of one's family, company or society are of the utmost importance and therefore preferred to personal ones.

⁴ More Nydell, 2012

⁵ Although born in Rhodesia, he is a British writer.

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