

GENDERED SPACE IN ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH'S *THE NO. 1 LADIES' DETECTIVE AGENCY*

N. Berrin AKSOY

Atılım University, Ankara, Turkey

Abstract: *Classic detective fiction provides an ideal space where issues of gender identities can be investigated along with the changing modes of crime fiction. Previously, in detective or crime fiction, women were displayed as victims or villains attached with social and cultural stereotypes. However, beginning in the 80s and 90s female characters started to be represented as detectives and investigators, which allowed space to the renegotiating of women's place in social and gender norms. Against this background, Alexander McCall Smith comes to the fore as a unique author who has managed to create the Mma Ramontswe character, owner of Ladies' No. 1 Detective Agency in an African setting, mainly Botswana, the country where he lived as a child and as a youth. Mma Ramontswe is an unconventional detective conducting her amateur profession in a space predominantly inhabited by herself and a fellow assistant lady detective. The novels evolving around No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency in serial form develop in two tracks. Firstly, the office of the agency is essentially a space for lady detectives which provides a metaphorical opportunity to explore gender roles in the less known country of Botswana, a former British colony, within the frame of postcolonial issues that are dealt with extreme subtlety by the author. Secondly, the outer space, which is Africa, where the stories occur is a geographical space recreated by a Scottish, white, medical law professor who never refrains from displaying his partiality towards Africa. Hence, the outer space becomes subject to a representation by the interpretation of a male author belonging to the colonial culture. Consequently, my presentation will focus on the discussion of metaphorical representation of gendered space in the detective fiction of Alexander McCall Smith and the social, cultural and postcolonial aspects of the representation of Africa being the outer space of these novels.*

Keywords: *detective fiction, postcolonial fiction, Mother Africa, space, gender*

This study deals with Alexander McCall Smith's popular novel *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* from a gendered space perspective and argues that the novel exemplifies a hybrid genre since it does not fully fall into the category of detective fiction nor postcolonial fiction for the reasons which will be discussed below.

The novel this paper mainly focuses on is the first one of the series *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, bearing the same title. It may be a good idea to commence by looking into the life of the author Alexander McCall Smith since the habitus of the first novel and indeed of the whole series displays reminiscences of author's personal life and experiences. Alexander

McCall Smith is a Professor of Medical Law at Edinburgh University and at the same time a prolific author of series of books which are known to millions around the world. His *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, the first book of the series with the same title, is the most widely read and popular one. With nearly 20 books so far that have sold over 25 million copies, Alexander McCall Smith and the Ladies Agency series have managed to create a world-wide reputation for the protagonist, Mma Precious Ramotswe, who is “the only lady private detective in Botswana” (McCall Smith, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*¹ 1) who lives in a landscape of iconic images of Africa. The space McCall Smith recreates in the novel is Botswana, an African country where the author spent many years, first as a student and then later as a founding member of Law faculty in that country. Alexander McCall Smith was born in Zimbabwe, then called Rhodesia, and grew up there, having ample access to Africa with its land, language, people and culture. Hence, the Botswana he describes extensively and enjoyably in the novel seems very much alive to us as if it were another character in the story. Almost in all events in the book, Botswana frames the action and dialogue as a subtle agent in the plot:

But there was also the view, which again could appear on no inventory. How could any such list describe what one saw when one looked out from Mma Ramotswe's door? To the front, an acacia tree, the thorn tree which dots the wide edges of the Kalahari; the great white thorns, a warning; the olive-grey leaves, by contrast, so delicate. In its branches, in the late afternoon, or in the cool of the early morning, one might see a Go-Away Bird, or hear it, rather. And beyond that acacia, over the dusty road, the roofs of the town under a cover of trees and scrub bush; on the horizon, in a blue shimmer of heat, the hills, like improbable, overgrown termite-mounds. (McCall Smith, *NILDA* 1-2)

However, this is only one face of the Botswana at the core of the plot. Although in the story Botswana and its capital city Gaborone are thriving, geographically, McCall Smith avoids most of the miseries, problems, disturbances of the country for the sake of creating an idyllic space for his protagonist, Mma Ramotswe, whose representation in the hands of the author renders her a figure of an ideal African womanhood. As the title suggests, the novel, published in Scotland first in 1998, claims to be detective fiction. It has many similarities with and differences from some classic detective novels, though. In our series, no serious crime, nor a confrontation with the

¹ Henceforth abbreviated *NILDA*.

police occurs. Mma Ramontswe is a new kind of detective, who is not trained or educated in this field, who has neither background nor experience in police-related affairs. On the other hand, the colonial history of Botswana is touched upon infrequently only to explain the current happy life in Botswana as the most developed and peaceful country in Africa:

In those days, there was no Botswana even, just the Bechuanaland Protectorate, and before that again there was Khama's country, and lions with the dry wind in their manes. But look at it now: a detective agency, right here in Gaborone, with me, the fat lady detective, sitting outside and thinking these thoughts about how what is one thing today becomes quite another thing tomorrow. (McCall Smith, *NILDA* 3)

According to Clare Counihan,

Suppressing a more nuanced version of Botswana's history, the novel expunges the dispossession and racialized disenfranchisement threatened by Cecil Rhodes and the South African colony's expansionist ambitions. Botswana is thus cordoned off from the rest of Africa and "all its trials" (*No. 1* 4). Finally, the allusion to Khama introduces the dynasty that continues to shape Botswana and invokes the narrative of Botswana's African exceptionalism, as the only African country that escaped underdevelopment, political turmoil, and corruption. (qtd. in Counihan 103)

This is actually what Mma Ramotswe thinks of her country. McCall Smith adopts a remote attitude to postcolonial attitude and postcolonial themes such as trauma, estrangement, exile, homelessness, belonging-nonbelonging. On the contrary, postcolonial themes are defied and undermined in the depiction of Africa and Botswana with all their traditions, values and people. Similarly, the detective genre is challenged by McCall Smith in his treatment of Mma Ramotswe and her "detective agency," which operates contrary to traditional detective agencies in traditional detective writings.

In detective fiction, which is also called "crime fiction," the genre creates a space for the detective to act several roles or to appear in a variety of guises. We have come across women detectives created by women or male authors with social and cultural features that remind us Mma Ramotswe, such as Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. Agatha Christie, the female creator of Miss Marple, attempts to question and challenge the generic qualities of a female character. Yet, Miss Marple is different from Mma Ramotswe in the sense that the latter is so much embedded in the space of her agency, framed

with Botswana as the background, that the generic elements become only a secondary issue to point out only Mma Ramotswe and Botswana themselves. Botswana circumscribes almost all the actions of the agency:

They (Mma Ramotswe and Mma Potokwani) walked back to Mma Potokwani's Office in silence. Above them the sky of Botswana was empty, except for a small corner in the distance, behind the wind, beyond the hills – a small patch of purple that was a great cloud of life giving rain the patched earth so yearned for, small now, but heading their way like an angel of mercy on great wings (McCall Smith, *Precious and Grace* 248)

Or elsewhere:

But there was also the view, which again could appear on no inventory. How could any such list describe what one saw when one looked out from Mma Ramotswe's door? To the front, an acacia tree, the thorn tree which dots the wide edges of the Kalahari; the great White thorns, a warning; the olive-grey leaves, by contrast, so delicate. In its branches, in the late afternoon, or in the cool of the early morning, one might see a Go-Away Bird, or hear it, rather. (McCall Smith, *NILDA* 2)

The break with conventions of detective fiction in terms of content and characters enables McCall Smith to create a unique form. The conventional detective novel form seen in this work is deeply rooted in the landscape, particularly in Africa, and in its people. It seems that McCall Smith is not writing for the sake of writing a detective novel but an African detective novel that exists as long as Africa is visibly in it, while featuring an African detective lady who is in love with the African landscape, its culture and its tradition of honour and human dignity:

She was a good detective, and a good woman. A good woman in a good country, one might say. She loved her country, Botswana, which is a place of peace, and she loved Africa, for all its trials. “I am not ashamed to be called an African patriot,” said Mma Ramotswe. “I love all the people whom God made, but I especially know how to love the people who live in this place. They are my people, my brothers and sisters. It is my duty to help them to solve the mysteries in their lives. That is what I am called to do.” (McCall Smith, *NILDA* 2)

So, the detective genre is a tool to create the gendered space both as Mma Ramotswe's agency with its connotations and the space of Botswana represented as female under the image of Mother Africa, itself symbolically represented by Mma Ramotswe in her large figure and in her endorsement of traditional values and patriotic beliefs. This view is echoed by Christine Matzke in her article which refers to Florence Stratton thus:

Stratton has developed two models to categorise different manifestations of the Mother Africa trope specific to the African male literary tradition, one known as “the pot of culture” strand, which analogizes woman to the heritage of African values, an unchanging African essence; the other “the sweep of history” strand, in which women serve “as an index of the state of the nation”. (Matzke 61)
Both strands reverberate in McCall Smith's Mma Ramotswe novels, though they are much more light-heartedly employed, and have been given a mildly gender-sensitive revision where necessary. (Matzke 67)

Ethnic detectives gained popularity as interest in postcolonial writing and themes became appealing subjects in literature. The detective fiction genre, which has always held a popular place in literature, laid the basis for the questioning and discussing of issues of gender, stereotypes and tradition against a background of postcolonial environment either explicitly, or as in the case of McCall Smith only rarely, subtly and secondarily.

Writing about the female detective figure allows characters to challenge their traditional roles in the detective genre. Traditionally, women characters are either victims, villains or embellishments in the plot. Postcolonial studies, new narrative techniques and today's detective fiction not only in the novel form but in cartoons and graphic books, have enabled the authors to challenge this traditional role, as Sabine Binder writes in *Women and Crime in Post-Transitional South African Crime Fiction*:

Rewriting and empowering the formerly outlawed female constitutes a “reverse discourse” in the Foucauldian sense; it explores “positions of resistance and agency” that were offered by previous practices but were inaccessible to women. (Binder 136)

In the 21st century, the meeting of postcolonial studies with innovative and experimental narrative techniques shaping literature in space and time owes a great deal to the developments in social, cultural and political spheres. Alexander McCall Smith uses this opportunity to create a gendered space for his lady detective to display and discuss various moral issues which concern

Africa, and particularly, Botswana. These issues involve tradition, morals, development and honour which are discussed metaphorically through the female character Mma Ramotswe and to a certain extent, Mma Makutsi and other minor female characters such as Mma Patokwane. Through the discussion of these issues with a touch of philosophical seriousness reveals, although as an understatement, McCall Smith's longing for recreating his youth's traditional domestic space which is felt in all his novels in the series.

According to Stuart Rosenbaum,

Affection for the people of Botswana, for their ways of life, and for their values is evident in McCall Smith's series of novels. And readers sense, I think, not just affection but deep respect for the ways of life that course through the cultural traditions of Botswana and to take root in individuals very much like Mma Ramotswe and her companion characters in McCall Smith's novels. In an interview on his American publisher's website, McCall Smith refers explicitly to Mma Ramotswe's practical wisdom and to the fact that he finds it not at all uncommon among her countrymen; he also refers explicitly to traditional virtues he finds in Africa, especially courtesy and natural dignity. In Alexander McCall Smith's hands, Mma Ramotswe is an exemplar of proper African character – and indeed of good character *tout court*. What gives McCall Smith's Botswana novels philosophical seriousness is his deep respect for African character ... and his intellectually serious treatment of that character. (Rosenbaum 79-80)

Hence, the gendered space of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* begins on these premises. The term *gendered space* refers to the meaning attached to the place where the agency is situated, for "Mma Ramotswe had a detective agency in Africa, at the foot of Kgale Hill" (McCall Smith, *NILDA* 1). Of course it is not a workplace in the formal sense of the word, with contract-based employment where there is subordination causing a hierarchical relation that weakens one party over the other, as outlined by Elbir (139-147). This space that the agency fills is shaped by the two women who inhabit that space and attach meanings to it. It is a symbolic place with domestic comforts such as warmth, food and friendship, and compassion, which are also the colours of Mma Ramotswe's business dealings: In the book, the spatial aspect of the agency is in connection with the social, cultural and emotional aspects that are manifestly feminine and symbolically African.

The protagonist Mma Ramotswe is a “traditionally built” (suggesting fat) Motswana woman in her late thirties. After surviving a disastrous marriage and the loss of her baby, contrary to her family’s expectations she decides to start a detective agency with the inheritance of a large cattle herd from her late father, Obed. Ramotswe.

In the opening of the book, Mma Ramotswe goes to Barclay’s Bank to withdraw her money and the following conversation takes place:

“You can buy a house with that,” said the lawyer. “And a business.”

“I am going to buy both of those.”

The lawyer looked interested. “What sort of business? A store? I can give you advice, you know.”

“A detective agency.”

The lawyer looked blank.

“There are none for sale. There are none of those.”

“... And anyway, can women be detectives? Do you think they can?”

“Why not?”, said Mma Ramotswe. ... This man was so certain of himself, so utterly convinced. What had it to do with him what she did? It was her money, her future. And how dare he say that about women....

“Women are the ones who know what’s going on,” she said quietly.

“They are the ones with eyes.” (McCall Smith, *NILDA* 59)

Mma Ramotswe is not an experienced or learned detective, she rather relies on instincts and common sense, and her loving and compassionate heart. Her microcosm is on the surface, composed of her long-term fiancé and later husband Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, two orphans adopted from the orphanage, her extremely diligent and equanimous secretary Mma Makutsi, who later starts her own typing school, and two incompetent apprentices who work in Mr Matekoni’s car repair workshop.

As Matzke writes in her study on Mma Ramotswe: “It is the women who are the most capable characters in the narratives” (Matzke 67). Indeed, the orphan farm in the book is run by the matronly Mma Potokwane, Mma Makutsi runs the car repair shop even more competently than Mr J.L.B. Matakoni does, and Mma Ramotswe proves to be a very intuitively talented detective.

In the agency, nothing much happens. The cases that come up are mostly about unfaithful spouses, small embezzlements and lost family members, bankruptcies or trivial plottings. There are no murders and no serious crimes committed. Mma Ramotswe deals with all the cases referred to the agency with great care and attention, with a business philosophy embarked on love, forgiveness and restitution (Finnegan 128) rather than

punishment and retribution. According to Finnegan (128), this attitude enables the author to interrogate ethical issues and to convey his message of the imperative for forgiveness and reconciliation in the modern world. McCall Smith's other stated motives for using Mma Ramotswe and her detective agency within the frame of Africa, according to critics like Finnegan and Matzke, is to say something about society in general and African society in particular, and, as mentioned earlier in this paper, to draw attention to the nostalgic space belonging to the postcolonial Africa of his childhood, which represents simplicity, gentleness and moral values.

One of the criticisms directed to the series is that in his novels McCall Smith manages to avoid the “pathological aspects of Southern Africa and Botswana” (Finnegan 130), although there are gentle hints at some social issues like draught, education or AIDS. McCall Smith being a Scotsman and belonging to the imperial colonizer society, “never appears to pose as an apologist for the British Empire (Finnegan 130). He “makes a female ‘other’ his protagonist in a truly gendered space and writes through her as an ‘insider’ thus challenging both Euro-American and African female literary stereotypes. Mma Ramotswe never challenges what she and her society inherited from the empire; however, she passes serious judgements and expresses strongly that “Africa had been forced to liberate herself, and nobody said that it was wrong to use force to achieve that result” (qtd. in Finnegan 130). Through Mma Ramotswe the author suggests that the former “Proctorate of Bechuanaland was just a great swathe of territory which the British really had not known what to do with” (McCall Smith, *NILDA* 150) and which was never truly colonised. Thus, we cannot say that this a colonialist's viewpoint. Clare Counihan writes about the peaceful decolonisation of Botswana under President Sir Seretse Khama, whom Mma Ramotswe holds in great esteem, and explains that:

Two generations later, Sir Seretse Khama led Botswana's independence negotiations and was first president. Now, Seretse's son, Ian, is president. Here, the novel doubles the erasure of colonial history by locating Botswana's essence in a pre-political, pre-historical past and by suggesting at the same time that Botswana's colonial and imperial history is in fact not traumatic: Botswana avoided the burdens of direct colonization (if not imperial control), as well as apartheid and a violent independence struggle. (Counihan 103)

Consequently, in all the novels in *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series, Botswana and Mma Ramotswe benignly occupy all the space and themes. Like Botswana, the leading country in Africa, Precious Ramotswe is the main occupant of all the space in Botswana and the capital city Gaborone

with her abundance of intelligence, intuition, courage and unusual profession for an African lady. Even the Mayor asks for her opinion:

How proud he [Mma Ramotswe's father] would have been to have seen her now, the owner of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, known to everybody of note in town, even to permanent secretaries and Government ministers. And how important he would have felt had he seen her that very morning almost bumping into the Malawian High Commissioner saying: "Good morning, Mma Ramotswe, you almost knocked me down there, but there's nobody I would rather be knocked down by than you, my goodness!" (McCall Smith, *NILDA* 159)

Her established and prestigious status in the Gaborone society does not mean that she uses her space at the cost of excluding men; on the contrary, she generally has respect for them and is appreciative towards them; however it is herself in the lead. As a matter of fact, she judges men according to their competences, adoptability and quality of judgement:

Here was one who might be to the outside world a mere *security consultant*, but who, in his inner heart, was on the frontline of a worldwide battle against the forces of disorder and chaos. (McCall Smith, *To the Land of Long Lost Friends*² 98)

In the treatment of her cases, Mma Ramotswe listens to her instinct and her heart, as well as her sound judgment, which are, for her, enough qualities to undermine cooperation with the police. She rather takes the law in her own hands:

Mma Ramotswe looked into his eyes. She had always been able to rely on her ability to tell whether a person was telling the truth or not, and she knew that Moretsi was not lying. There was no point in sending this man to prison. "Very well," she said. "I will not tell the police about any of this... But in return, you will promise me that there will be no more lost fingers. Do you understand?" (McCall Smith, *NILDA* 171)

In this exclusively gendered space created for her by the author, the reader also encounters the dialogue of tradition vs modernity in male /female points of view. Botswana is in the process of urbanisation after the

² Henceforth *LLL*.

decolonisation. Mma Ramotswe values the importance of modernization as does her fiancé, Mr J.L.B. Matekoni; however, they both rely on their traditional skills to carry out their profession. “She values being ‘a citizen of the modern Republic of Botswana, where there is a constitution which guaranties the dignity of all citizens, lady private detectives among them’, but she and Mr J.L.B. Matekoni have an ongoing struggle with the ‘modern manners’ of the apprentices” (qtd. in Finnegan 138). Her gendered space, framed by the agency and Botswana, is firmly grounded in the laws of modern Botswana, which safeguards legal protection and individual rights and freedoms, and which cuts off the country from the traces of colonial rule. Nevertheless, Mma Ramotswe believes that she owes her good fortunes, her husband and her family to the ancestral spiritual charms of Africa, which has been so generous for her and for her beloved Botswana:

She looked at Mr J.L.B. Matekoni with pride and gratitude that had been delivered into her care, and thanked whatever, or whoever, it was that kept watch over her life. God, perhaps, or God acting in concert, as to speak, with a committee of ancestors – her mother, her grandmother, and ladies going back a long time to the early days of her people. And Africa, too, she was there somewhere in those protective forces, wise and nurturing, Mother Africa had arms wide enough to embrace all her children (McCall Smith, *LLL* 10).

Doubtlessly, McCall Smith favours modernity and development. This attitude is manifested in the series ample times, however, in the gendered role of the detective profession and in the symbolic mother Africa image of Mma Ramotswe, who advocates traditional values of respect, dignity and traditional manners there lies a message to the West. In a subtle way, the message says that these values still survive in Africa as long as mother Africa is alive and thriving thanks to Mma Ramotswe and her likes and all the space they occupy, which make the series of novels so attractive in Europe and the USA.

Finnegan sums up this stance of McCall Smith as follows:

McCall Smith... has absolutely appropriated the detective genre, and uses his imagined utopian Botswana to investigate the values of society, both in Europe and the US, and in postcolonial Africa. The paradox is that he is writing back to the West but also from the West using an African voice. (Finnegan 140)

McCall Smith’s *The No1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* novels invoke spaces that dramatize the radical changes that Mother Africa and particularly Botswana

are undergoing. The gendered, domestic spaces depicted in the series of the novels connect the past with the present, the traditional with the modern, and the private with the national. The identification of Mma Ramotswe with Mother Africa and Botswana enables McCall Smith to represent and explore the formation of postcolonial Botswana. Hence, gendered quality of the spaces portrayed in the novels are inseparable from their significance as national spaces.

Works Cited

- Binder, Sabine. *Women and Crime in Post-transitional South African Crime Fiction*. Costerus New Series. Brill/Rodopi, 2020.
- Counihan, Clare. “Detecting outside History in the ‘No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency””. *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 44 (2) (2011): 101-118.
- Elbir, Nazlı. *Kişiliğinin Korunması Bağlamında İşçiye Ait Kişisel Verilerin Korunması* [Protection of Employees’ Personal Data in the Context of Protection of Personality]. Ankara: Yetkin, 2020.
- Finnegan, Lesley. “A Completely Satisfactory Detective: The Detective Fiction Genre in Alexander McCall Smith’s Botswana Novels.” *English Studies in Africa* 2 (2006): 123-147.
- Matzke, Christine. “A good woman in a good country’ or the Essence is in the Pumpkin: Alexander McCall Smith’s Mma Ramotswe Novels as a Case of Postcolonial Nostalgia.” *European Journal of Cognitive Psychology* 1 (2006): 64-71.
- McCall Smith, Alexander. *Tears of the Giraffe*. London: Abacus, 2003.
- McCall Smith, Alexander. *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*. London: Abacus, 2003.
- McCall Smith, Alexander. *In the Company of Cheerful Ladies*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004.
- McCall Smith, Alexander. *Precious and Grace*. London: Abacus, 2017.
- McCall Smith, Alexander. *To the Land of Long Lost Friends*. London: Abacus, 2019.