

**Refusing to Read:
Precious Ramotswe Meets Rahab for a Cup of Bush Tea**

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Abstract

*In this article, the biblical Rahab and I will pay a visit to Precious Ramotswe for a cup of red bush tea. That is, the narrative of Rahab will provide a reading grid by which to analyse a Botswanan woman character, Precious Ramotswe, created and popularized by Alexander McCall Smith's novel, *The Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*. This postcolonial feminist reading of the novels analyses the characterization of Mma Ramotswe through Rahab's context, highlighting how McCall Smith's narrator serves as a spy who investigates, reports, and translates Botswanan cultures for the Western world by using her as his mouth piece. The article explores how McCall Smith constructs colonialising feminism through the paradigm of saving brown women from brown men. The article highlights that such a strategy depends on a colonial portrait of black men as docile and over-sexed. While *The Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series has won worldwide popularity, this article highlights its dependence on colonially-cultivated tastes of constructing Africa as the Other and a readership that still yearns for such literature in the Western world. McCall Smith thus indulges in colonial images, metaphors, and narrative designs of the Other and through them sates the reading appetites of millions in the Western world.*

KEYWORDS: Rahab's Reading Prism, Africa, Colonial narratives, Ideology, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Decolonizing, Masculinities, Lady detective.

There were two main targets, Mma Ramotswe thought. First, there were fat people, who were now getting quite used to a relentless campaign

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against them; and then there were men. Mma Ramotswe knew that men were far from perfect—that many men were wicked and selfish and lazy and that they had, by and large, made rather bad job of running Africa...but there were plenty of good men about—people like Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, Sir Seretse Khama (first President of Botswana, Statesman, Paramount Chief of the Bamangwato) and Obed Ramotswe, retired miner, expert judge of cattle, and her much-loved Daddy.²

Introduction: Drinking Bush Tea and Stories of Refusing to Read

Red Bush tea appears in the very first paragraph of the first volume of sixteen in the book series *The Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, written by Alexander McCall Smith.³ Thereafter, it is generously and frequently served in the series. Those who have read this series of books will know that there is endless drinking of Bush teas by Precious Mma Ramotswe and her clients, colleagues, friends, and family. In *The Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, Bush tea is the beverage that one takes to relax, and to aid in discussing, strategizing, and teasing out all the knotty unresolved issues that a lady detective needs to tackle. So now I invite you, the reader, to a cup of Bush tea (in the company of the biblical character, Rahab, found in Joshua 2 and 6) to investigate McCall Smith's constructions and reconstructions of gender and coloniality.

The book series was first launched in 1998 and today includes sixteen volumes. The books' leading character is Precious Ramotswe, a Motswana woman, who decides to open the first and only detective agency in Botswana after inheriting wealth from her father, who died of lung infection as a result of his mining career in South African mines. The series is set in Botswana and features only black characters save for a few occasions on which it features minor characters from Nigeria, Germany, the USA, and South Africa. The series title, *Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, takes its name from the first novel that appeared in 1998. By 2005, more than five million copies had been sold and the series has now been translated into about forty-two languages. I am sure that these numbers are now much higher. The series has won McCall Smith numerous awards. It

² Alexander McCall Smith, *Tears of the Giraffe*, (London: Polygon Books, 2000), 117.

³ At the time of the writing of this article there were eleven volumes and they had been translated into forty-two languages.

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has now been produced into movie and a TV series—all this within the first decade of its publication. It is not an exaggeration to say the series have become a worldwide phenomenon.

I first heard about the series through word of mouth in the Western world. Every time I was introduced as coming from Botswana, I got a startling response: “You are from Botswana! Aaah this is where *The Number 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* is set. Tell us what you think about it.” I asked who had written it, and they said a Scottish man, Alexander McCall Smith. Politely, I said “Sorry, I haven’t read it.” I soon realised that in whatever city I landed in the world, the question about Alexander McCall Smith’s novels set in Botswana would come up.

Over time, I realised there are three types of readers of these books. First, there are those who are very eager to meet me and to ask me about the series and they do not waste any time doing so. Among these, the conversation often begins right at the airport. The second group of readers consists of curious, but very cautious readers, who carefully find a discreet way of asking me about *The Number 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*. The third group consists of almost guilty people, who will only reluctantly ask the question or admit that they have read the books. It is only when braver readers than them ask the question that readers from this third group tend to chip in and voice a question, admitting that they have read the series. Sometimes such readers or followers of the series only admit to doing so after I have known them for a while, a stance that makes me feel that I have been watched and spied on unknowingly. In general, I would say the readers are largely women, although there are also some men who are avid readers of the series. In turn, I have to say, the series has also made me self-conscious. The books make me feel as if I am being watched, detected, so to speak, since the narrative constantly describes Batswanan women’s bodies, perceived through male eyes, in particular Precious Ramotswe’s body, which he describes, politely, as being of a traditional build, but more explicitly, and frequently, as fat and round. Precious Ramotswe wears size 22 and the narrative underlines that she is highly appreciated for it. The position of the narrative concerning Batswanan women’s figures is captured by one of her clients, who, unaware that he was being investigated for unfaithfulness, supposedly, “put his arms around her [Mma Ramotswe’s] waist, and told her that he liked good, fat women,” for “all this business about being thin was nonsense and was

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quite wrong for Africa.”⁴ This statement suggests that there is an ideological support for constructing Batswana women’s bodies as fat or traditionally built, and that thin African women’s bodies would be unacceptable, less than ideal.

Of course, my answer to people’s question of whether I had read the books was always, “No, I have not read the books.” Mostly people would be surprised and fall silent. Then they would ask, “May I know why?” Politely, I would always say, “I haven’t gotten to it.” At this point they would happily say, “They are very good books, you know. They feature this clever woman. She inherits wealth from her father and buys herself a home and she sets up her own ladies’ detective agency and solves people’s mysteries.”

My friend, Kathleen Wicker, asked me about *The Number 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* series in 2003. As usual, I said I had not read the series. But then I explicitly added that I did not intend to read them for “it is just the same old colonial story of one more white man writing about Africa and getting famous for it while African authored books are ignored. What is unique about that?” After long adopting a position of refusing to read the series, Kathleen Wicker went shopping and bought two of the novels for me. She gave them to me, saying, “I think you must read these novels, Musa, and hear what this white man is saying about Botswana.” I thanked her and took the novels back home with me. I tried to read them, but each time I could not really get beyond the first chapter. I found them downright boring. I could not understand why people were raving about them. After a while, I gave them to my son, who also could not read them. For a number of years now, Kathleen Wicker and I have been talking about McCall Smith’s novels and my refusal or inability to read them.

It should not be an issue that McCall Smith writes about Botswana, for we want to celebrate academic freedom. Yet while academic freedom is welcome, there is something to be said about the fact that when African writers tell their own story, they rarely receive the same attention on the global stage of knowledge production as do those who write about them. Since colonial times, the Western world would still rather hear about Africa from white writers than from Africans themselves. In her recent paper, entitled, “Is it Ethical to Study Africa?” Amina Mama writes that “when it comes to research... on Africa...the same global

⁴ Alexander McCall Smith, *The Number 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* (London: Polygon Books, 1998), 142.

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inequalities are still evident. Most of what is received as knowledge about Africa is produced in the West.”⁵ She also underlines that African perspectives are often ignored. One could add that most native African readers have often found the Western-produced works difficult to read, because they are often produced from within a colonial framework.⁶ Whether Alexander McCall intended it or not, his series on *The Number 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* is another in the long history of male colonial writers, along with David Livingstone, Henry Stanley, Joseph Conrad, John Mackenzie, Wilbur Smith, and numerous other missionaries, traders, colonial officers, and adventure travelers who went to Africa and wrote letters, reports, and tales for readers back home. These writers constructed black Africa in a particular manner and created substantial consumers for narratives about the Other. Contemporary Western writing about Africa benefits greatly from a historically established tradition of Western readers who learn about Africa through Western eyes.

The issue, however, is also that to depend on an established literary tradition means one is already tapping into an established literary tradition of stereotypes, themes, and ideology that readers have come to expect. For the portrait of Africa from the Western perspective, this usually includes portraying Africa as the dark continent, a place of misery, of underdevelopment, over-sexed people, childish/immature superstitious savages, and of a land that is empty, undeveloped, and unoccupied, hence available for the taking.

Since most Western writing about Africa is done from within this colonial framework, it is extremely hard reading for African people. Most African readers cringe when they read Western writing about Africa. We do not recognize ourselves in such writing; in fact, it leads us to despise ourselves. But because writing Africa as colonising Africa is a two-centuries old business, its foundations are strong and African writers and their voices are, more often than not, ignored while the perspectives of Western writers are widely welcomed by the well-established readership. This also means that most Africans are forced to read writings about Africa that are not for Africans. Indeed, since colonial times, there has been a tradition that most celebrated writings about Africa are not by African

⁵Amina Mama, “Is it ethical to Study Africa? Preliminary Thoughts on Scholarship and Freedom,” *African Studies Review* 50, no. 1 (2007):1-26, here 4.

⁶ Musa W. Dube, “Bible in the Bush: The First ‘Literate’ Batswana Bible,” *Translation Issue* 2 (2013):79-104.

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writers and thinkers. This is the question we need to put to *The Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* narratives—how the series works through and with the established colonial literary tradition.

Like the writers who have gone before him, Alexander McCall Smith openly admits that his writing targets Western readers.⁷ How does McCall Smith manage this tradition? Does he rely on this tradition or supersede it? Is it even possible to supersede a well-established literary tradition? Second, in one of his interviews, McCall Smith openly said he believes that white people who benefitted from the colonization of Africa must give back to the continent, which is what his novels seek to do. Again, giving back to Africa is a statement fraught with colonial ideology. David Livingstone, a celebrated Scotsman, who was buried in Westminster Abbey with British royalty for his work, sought to open up Africa for Western civilization, Christianity, and commerce. His heart is still buried in African soil, but the agenda that he promoted was actual colonialism of the continent, which was not an empowering gift to Africa.⁸ Alexander McCall Smith (another Scotsman) was born in Rhodesia, the current Zimbabwe, where his father worked as a colonial officer. He later went to study in Edinburgh and remained there, adopting British citizenship. Sometime in the 1980s, he came to work at the University of Botswana, department of law, and subsequently returned back to Scotland. This paper seeks to begin detective work on Alexander McCall Smith's narratives, from a postcolonial feminist perspective.

Although I assumed the strategy of refusing to read his stories for a while, I cannot pretend that I did not manage to keep the series away. As I describe above, the series were constantly brought to me and read for me within many metropolitan cities of the West. Finally, in 2008, Botswana entered the debate about the series, when there were preparations afoot to shoot a movie on McCall Smith's books in the country. To avoid a situation where the movie could end up shot in South Africa, the

⁷ Musa W. Dube, "Decolonizing the Darkness: Bible Readers and the Colonial Cultural Archive," 34-37. In F. Lozada and G. Carey, eds. *Soundings in Cultural Criticism*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013). See H.M. Stanley, *In Darkest Africa: Quest, Rescue and Retreat of Emin Governor of Equitima* (Toronto: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890).

⁸ Musa W. Dube, "The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives," 1-28 in M. W. Dube, A. Mbuvi, and D. Mbuwayesango, eds. *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (Atlanta: SBL, 2012).

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government was preparing to put up 30million Pula to build the village that was to appear in the film. This debate led to the scrutiny of the contents of McCall Smith's novels. The parliament approved the money needed for the movie village for tourist purposes: they wanted those millions of Western readers to come to Botswana and see Precious Ramotswe's detective agency country home. They wanted some of the money that McCall Smith earned from using Botswanan characters to come back to the country in the form of tourism. Consequently, in 2009, *The Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* followed me straight into my house. It was playing right in my sitting room as a TV series. I had to watch it. When I saw the TV series, my fears were confirmed. McCall Smith had maintained a colonial mode in which he was reporting the weirdest things about Botswana or Africa to Western readers. The Batswanans he depicted as the exotic other. As the narrative itself states, detective work "was not like being a mechanic; this was like, well being a spy, an informant, a seeker-out of the tawdry secrets of others."⁹ What I saw in the TV series, playing on my TV screen, was that the character of Mma Ramotswe as a detective was created as a perfect lens for the author's colonial purpose. She served as "an informant, a seeker-out of the tawdry secrets of others," that were being reported for and to Western readers and now Western viewers. The TV series featured different cases handled by Precious Ramotswe, and through the detective lens the narrative constructed and presented the exotic other to the Western world. The cases included an African indigenous church baptism at a dam that leads to the drowning of member, who is eaten by a crocodile; a child stolen for purposes of ritual murder; many cheating husbands and frustrated wives; Nigerians twins missing fingers, and so forth. This is how I first got a glance at the contents of the series.

Rahab Meets Mma Ramotswe for a Cup of Tea

I finally decided to read McCall Smith's books to honor Kathleen Wicker's persistent challenge that I needed to read the books. In this article, I seek to read the series using a model that I developed a while ago,

⁹ Alexander McCall Smith, *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive* (London: Polygon Books, 2007), 131.

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named Rahab's reading prism.¹⁰ It is a reading model I developed to deal with the African challenges of reading literature that is written *about* them but not *for* them. This literature is written by the Western world from a colonial and colonising perspective, meaning it is both racist and Eurocentric. There is indeed a similarity between the biblical woman Rahab, the Canaanite woman, who appears in Jewish narratives (Joshua 2), and Precious Ramotswe written by McCall Smith, a Scottish man. Both the biblical Rahab and Mma Ramotswe of *The Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* are women written about and popularized by traveling male writers from powerful and foreign nations. Both women take literary journeys that relocate them from their own nations to the nations of their dominant writers, where they are celebrated and immortalized. Rahab, a story found in Joshua 2 and 6, has been a part of literary history for more than two millennia. In the narrative, Joshua sends two male spies ahead to investigate the targeted land and report back to the invading nation. The spies go, to a woman who supposedly best represents the cradle of information in her land, a sex worker named Rahab. They spend a night at her place, and then return to report to Joshua what supposedly represents the state of Jericho, having gathered their information solely from Rahab. In McCall Smith's novel, a woman who represents the cradle of knowledge about Botswana is herself a lady detective, Precious Ramotswe. But for whom does she do her job? For whom does she spy?

Reading McCall Smith narratives from a postcolonial feminist perspective means investigating how the novels work within the colonial literary tradition of presenting the Other and how that tradition also utilises gender to characterise the Other. This article thus seeks to investigate how McCall works with and through the well-established literary colonial tradition of the portrait of Africa from the Western perspective. Gender is central to McCall Smith's narratives, as attested by the leading character, Precious Ramotswe, the woman who sets up the first and only *Ladies' Detective Agency* in Botswana. The themes of colonial literature about Africa are too numerous to be investigated adequately within this paper. So I focus on only two issues: First how McCall Smith's novels win the hearts of Western readers by constructing a feminist narrative, which in the process portrays Botswanan men as useless and over-sexed. Indeed *The Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency's* main business is to investigate

¹⁰ Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 121.

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unfaithful husbands, and as the narrative explicitly says, “All women in Botswana were victims of the fecklessness of men. There were virtually no men these days who would marry a woman and settle down to look after her children; men like that seemed to be the a thing of the past.”¹¹ Is McCall Smith making an attempt to save brown women from brown men?¹² Such a question is not farfetched given that in the earliest pages of the first volume the narrative flirts with the subaltern question. The leading character says: “And who am I? I am precious Ramotswe, citizen of Botswana, daughter of Obed Ramotswe who died because he was a miner and could no longer breathe. *His life was unrecorded; who is there to write down the lives of ordinary people?*” (Emphasis added). This massive question gave us the sixteen volume series (and still going), featuring a woman lady detective, Precious Ramotswe, who will give us the inside stories of “ordinary people” through the hidden eye behind the detective agency—though this eye is actually none other than that of Alexander McCall Smith, a white Scottish man. As one who speaks for the subaltern, seeking to write their unrecorded lives, McCall Smith adopts a technique that is seemingly feminist and decolonizing. Or is it?

Precious Ramotswe Feminism: Saving Brown Women from Brown Men¹³

Let us start with the construction of Precious Ramotswe as a feminist. I believe this is one aspect of McCall Smith’s novels that has appealed to worldwide readers, especially the women readers. As the title of the series attests, it is *The Number 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* series. It features a woman as the leading character, Precious Ramotswe. The first volume has made meticulous efforts to construct her character for the role that she must play throughout the sixteen-plus volumes. Mma Ramotswe is the beloved and only daughter of a former South African miner whose lungs have been wrecked by the dust from the mines. He quits mining and returns to Botswana when Precious Ramotswe is three and takes up cattle farming. Unfortunately, Precious Ramotswe’s biological mother is

¹¹ McCall Smith, *The Number 1 Ladies’*, 140.

¹² Gayatri C. Spivack, “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” 66-104. In Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman eds. *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 90-104.

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tragically run over by a train. A cousin, who has been deserted by a husband for her barrenness, moves in and starts raising her with much love. Precious' father adores his daughter. He wants to start a retail business, but decides that he will continue with cattle farming and leave the whole herd to his daughter to start the business. Indeed, when he passes, he leaves 180 cattle to his daughter advising that she should sell them and start a retail business. Instead, she opts to start a detective agency. Mma Ramotswe is described as a child who is endowed with both beauty and intelligence and blessed with a loving father and cousin dedicated to her well being. Precious Ramotswe is as precious as her name describes her. Her gender does not deny her inheritance of wealth.

Precious Ramotswe's feminist and detective eye is closely associated with the cousin who raised her, after her mother's passing. This cousin had suffered at the hands of patriarchy that measured her humanity by her capacity to bear children. Unfortunately, she was barren. Her husband walked out on her and found another woman. Her husband then wrote a letter to her, informing her that his new wife was pregnant. A year later, she received another letter, this time "with a photograph of his child."¹⁴ The cousin returned to her own mother and grandmother but they treated her with quiet contempt, for they "believed that a woman who was left by her husband would almost have deserved her fate."¹⁵ When Precious Ramotswe's mother dies, the cousin leaves her parents' house and goes to raise Precious Ramotswe. Reflecting on her experience, this cousin was determined that Precious Ramotswe not experience the same oppression that she underwent as a barren and uneducated married woman. As the narrative points out, "the cousin wanted Precious to be clever."¹⁶ Thus "she started teaching Precious to count. They counted goats and cattle. They counted boys playing in the dust. They counted trees, giving each tree a name: crooked one, one with no leaves; one where *mophane* worms like to hide; one where no bird will go..."¹⁷ This cousin, we hear, "made Precious remember lists of things; the names of members of the family, the names of cattle her grandfather owned, the names of chiefs."¹⁸ Due to her diligent work, "by the time Precious went to school at the age

¹⁴ McCall Smith, *The Number 1 Ladies*, 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

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of six she knew her alphabets, her numbers up to two hundred and she could recite the entire first chapter of the Book of Genesis in the Setswana translation.”¹⁹ The narrator makes a significant comment here, noting that “she was never wrong, this child who watched everybody and everything with her wide eyes, solemn eye. And slowly without anybody ever intending this, the qualities of curiosity were nurtured in the child’s mind.”²⁰ In short, this training set the foundation of detective work for Precious Ramotswe. Nonetheless, the narrative is meticulous to leave no stone unturned for building an impeccable character through Sunday school and formal schooling. Precious Ramotswe attends Sunday school where she “learned about good and evil.”²¹ At school, Precious Ramotswe continues to build upon the skills imparted by her cousin. The link is directly made. “Precious Ramotswe likes to draw, an activity which the cousin had encouraged from an early age.”²² Through this skill she demonstrates her capacity to observe what is going on around her. Her teachers encouraged Precious and “sketch followed sketch.” She even wins the first prize in a national art competition. Precious Ramotswe becomes the best girl in her school.²³

But at the age of sixteen she decides that she has had enough of school and goes to live with her cousin in the city, who is now happily married to a rich man, who runs buses. Although her father would rather have her continue with her education she realises that “she wanted freedom.” At her cousins’ home, Precious Ramotswe begins to demonstrate her mental skills by working in the office of the bus company, “where she added invoices and checked figures in the drivers’ records.”²⁴ Soon she outperforms the fulltime workers, for “it was easy for Precious with her memory to remember how to do new things and to apply knowledge faultlessly. She did her own checking often unasked, and although everything usually added up, now and then she found a small discrepancy.” But then Precious found more discrepancies. “She found a discrepancy of slightly over two thousand Pula in fuel bills invoices and she drew the attention of her cousins’ husband.”²⁵ In this job she is shown

¹⁹ Ibid., 34.

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Ibid., 35.

²² Ibid., 41.

²³ Ibid., 45.

²⁴ Ibid., 47.

²⁵ McCall Smith, *The Number 1 Ladies*, 47-48.

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to be a diligent worker, who is self-motivated and investigative. Indeed, in this job at the bus office company, Precious Ramotswe is presented as having her apprenticeship for the job of detective, for the section closes by saying, "This was her first case. This was the beginning of the career of Mma Ramotswe."²⁶ By so doing, the narrative has centered Mma Ramotswe's formation as a lady detective around the desires of a cousin who had suffered at the hands of patriarchy.

Given that the McCall Smith narrative holds that, "All women in Botswana were victims of the fecklessness of men,"²⁷ and given that Precious Ramotswe's detective agency is described as consisting of three sets of clients, Precious Ramotswe's training would be incomplete if she had not experienced marriage. I mean bad marriage. This happens very quickly. This girl who has impeccable intelligence, wisdom, power of observation, and analysis meets a certain Note Mokoti, a trumpeter, a musician. The narrative does not mince words in telling us that, "She was frozen, unable to walk away, mesmerised like prey before a snake."²⁸ Whatever gifts she had, ceased to work in front of Note Mokoti. She is a virgin but Mokoti ensures that "now things must change. Right now. Tonight. He hurt her, she asked him to stop, but he put her head back and hit her once across the cheek. But he immediately kissed her where the blow had struck, and said he had not meant to do it....then he hurt her again and struck her back with his belt."²⁹ Thus Mma Ramotswe has her first experience of love making, but she still agrees to marry the man. Her father, who is certain that Note Mokoti is not a good man, tells "her that she would never have to marry anybody she did not want to marry."³⁰ She marries him nonetheless and spends two years in a very violent relationship, which includes being beaten while pregnant and losing her baby. Thereafter, Note Mokoti deserts her and Precious returns to her father's house. Her father dies and leaves all his 180 cattle to Precious Ramotswe, advising her to start a retail business, but she says she prefers to open and run a detective agency. Her father has never worried that he has a daughter and no son. He has never doubted that his daughter fully deserves inheriting his property. While he loved her and wanted the best

²⁶ Ibid., 48.

²⁷ Ibid., 140.

²⁸ Ibid., 51.

²⁹ Ibid., 54.

³⁰ Ibid., 54.

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for her and always advised her, Precious Ramotswe was always free to make independent decisions, as attested by her decision to drop out of school and her decision to marry Note Mokoti.

The narrative features other strong supporting women characters. There is Grace Makhutsi, the secretary at the agency. Although Makhutsi's road of life is paved with all sorts of hardships, she is a go-getter. She has scored the highest marks in the secretarial college, 97%. Her score is repeatedly stated. She excels in just about everything, but she is not beautiful, does not know how to dress, and interrupts people. Consequently, she is not hired because offices that are full of men prefer beautiful well-dressed secretaries, the narrative says. So girls whose grades were average get better jobs than her. Mma Ramotswe hires her as her secretary and receptionist. She is impeccable in her delivery. She gets promoted to the position of assistant detective and then associate detective. Mma Makhutsi, who is still insufficiently paid, decides to open her own Kalahari Typing school for men. Through this school Mma Makhutsi finally makes more money and finds romance. But alas, he was a married man, for his wife comes to seek the services of Mma Ramotswe! Another door opens for Mma Makhutsi, since she finally finds an honest and loving man who buys her a wedding ring.

Another woman icon is Mapotokwane, the woman who runs the orphanage with diligence and shrewdness, supplying all that the children need and preserving all that they have. She even gets some of her friends to adopt children.

There are many minor characters who also stand out, such as Happy Bapetsi, who is the No1 sub-accountant, who says, "Now I am the number 1 sub-accountant and I do not think I can go any further because all men are worried that I will make them look stupid."³¹ There is also Mma Mothibi, the Sunday school teacher who has been a significant figure in moulding Mma Ramotswe. When Mma Ramotswe reports a Sunday school boy who wants to show her his penis, Mma Mothibi, a woman pastor, does not hesitate to say, "Boys, men, they are all the same. They think that this thing is something special and they are all proud of it. They do not know how ridiculous it is."³²

With this background Mma Ramotswe begins her Ladies Detective agency, soon after her father's death. Her cousin, who raised

³¹ McCall Smith, *The Number 1 Ladies*, 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 37.

her, has trained her to be an empowered woman. Precious Ramotswe is a very good natured, kind, and polite woman, but she makes very little room for patriarchy. When her legal adviser expresses doubts about the viability of opening a detective agency, she insists that when people see the sign “*No 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*...they will think those ladies will know what is going on,” for women are “the ones who know.” When the lawyer expresses further doubts, Mma Ramotswe seizes the opportunity to inform him that his zip is open and the lawyer has not noticed!³³

Troubled Masculinities and Over-Sexed Men

Against this background of strong women characters, who insist on their liberation, the narrative portrays three particularly troubling masculinities of Batswanan men. The first group consists of the young boys. I have just mentioned the young boy who is constantly trying to show Precious Ramotswe his penis, about which the woman pastor says, “Boys, men...They are all the same.”³⁴ Then we have two teenage boys who are working as apprentices in J.L.B. Matekoni’s garage. They are characterised, repeatedly, as gazing at girls, calling girls, and thinking of nothing else but girls. The younger one finally gets converted to Christianity and becomes better, although he seems to backslide. Charlie, the eldest apprentice, who seems to be more obsessed with girls, finally quits his job to start a cab service and its name is *The Number 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency Taxi Service*. He says it will specialize in carrying girls and making them feel safe. But given the narrative emphasis and how it underlines his obsession with girls, this is doubtful. The worst amongst the male characters is Note Mokoti, the violent young man that Precious married in her girlhood, whom I mentioned earlier.

Second, we have a group of ‘a very few good men.’ To be precise, I have encountered about five: Precious Mma Ramotswe’s father; Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, her second fiancé; the man who owned the butcher shop; the bus driver who married her barren cousin; and Mma Makhutsi’s fiancé. Unfortunately, the traits of these few good men are somewhat troubling. Precious Ramotswe’s father, although dedicated to his daughter and leaving his wealth to her, seemed to be the kind of man who had lost his life even while he was alive. Indeed, he raised cattle. But by and large he

³³ Ibid., 62.

³⁴ Ibid., 37.

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seemed to be waiting for death, by giving up his dreams and deferring them to his daughter, who is expected to start and run the retail business that he wanted to have. Notably, since his wife died when Precious was about three, he never married again or seemed to seek the company of any woman, nor to pursue his dreams.

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni is the epitome of a good man in the series. He is described as “a good natured and gracious of man,” who never lies. The narrative never ever refers to him with a first name. He is always Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, thus underlining that he is a gentleman. He is by far the most developed male character in the series. Professionally he is a mechanic, who fixes cars. He proposes marriage to Precious Ramotswe and at first she declines, but finally she agrees. We note thereafter that Mr J.L.B. Matekoni seems to be a confused man who needs to be convinced that he needs to buy his fiancée an engagement ring, much as he will be paralyzed about taking the first step towards arranging the wedding. Once convinced, he buys Precious Ramotswe a ring. In an amazing moment, Mrs Potokwane, the woman who was committed to raising orphaned children, forces him to adopt two children before he could formulate his decision and before he could inform his fiancée. Thereafter Mr J.L.B. Matekoni falls into unexplained deep depression. Fortunately he recovers and the doctor instructs that he should not be subjected to stress. Thereafter he again does not speak about the wedding, until Mrs Potokwane once again coaxes him. Consistent with his actions and his confused way of being unable to make key decisions for himself or to know what to do, Mr J.L.B. Matekoni’s IQ is not that high. As the narrative says, “Mr J.L.B. Matekoni was a very good man... He was just easy company. You could sit with Mr J.L.B. Matekoni for hours, during which he might say nothing very important, but what he said was never tedious.”³⁵ When he asks Precious Ramotswe to marry him she agrees, for “she realised that here was a man who was as good as her father, and they would be happy together.”³⁶ In short, the best of the very best are shown to be docile and below average thinkers, a portrayal eloquent in its simplicity.

Mr. Badule, a notable man who likewise falls under the category of a few good men, is the man who owns a butcher’s shop. He is described as a man of great integrity. He suspects that his wife is seeing someone else, using the money set aside to pay their son’s school fees. As it turns

³⁵ McCall Smith, *Tears of the Giraffe*, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

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out, his wife is indeed seeing someone else, and the son is not even Mr Badule's. This unique case of a cheating wife is used by Mma Ramotswe to underline the failure of husbands. As Mma Makhutsi exclaims, "Poor man. Poor man!" Mma Ramotswe adds a sentence that captures the series characterisation of Batswana men as oversexed by saying that "but remember, that for every cheating wife in Botswana, there are five hundred and fifty cheating husbands."³⁷ When quizzed about the source of her data, "Mma Ramotswe chuckled and said, "I made it up. But that does not stop it from being true."³⁸

Indeed the latter statement leads us to the third group of Batswanan men. As the statement highlights, it is by far the largest. It consists of wayward fathers and husbands. The very first case that Mma Ramotswe addresses concerns a husband and father who disappeared, leaving his wife with four kids. Another man, who possibly knew this story, appears and claims to be the father. The second case concerns Mrs Malatsi, who comes to the agency to report her missing husband. It turned out he was swallowed by a crocodile during a baptism service held at the dam. But surprise surprise! She receives the bad news calmly, commenting "that's much better than knowing he is in the arms of some other woman."³⁹ Of the many women who visit Mma Ramotswe's agency to complain about this and that, it is notable that Mma Ramotswe's first response is always to suspect a cheating husband. Indeed, many times women first seek her out because their husband comes smelling of an unfamiliar perfume; a husband does not ask his wife to fulfil his sexual needs; and other times it is stated that the man has sent his wife to stay in the village so he can see other women in the city. Some women, like Rose, Mma Ramotswe's house keeper, supposedly have four children fathered by four different men.⁴⁰ The story indeed comes close to home when Mma Makhutsi's date, from The Kalahari Typing School, turns out to be a married man. Well, there are many other examples I could name, but I believe I've made my point.

Perhaps, this portrayal of failed masculinities is driven by the desire to reverse roles, for the narrator tells us that "Mma Ramotswe knew that men were far from perfect—that many men were wicked and selfish

³⁷ Ibid., 133.

³⁸ Ibid., 133.

³⁹ McCall Smith, *The Number 1 Ladies*, 72.

⁴⁰ McCall Smith, *The Number 1 Ladies*, 134.

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and lazy and that they had, by and large, made rather a bad job running Africa..."⁴¹ save, of course, for a few good men, who, as we have already seen, are rather docile and of average if not below average intelligence. Thus the feminism constructed here does subscribe to what Gaytri Spivack has named as the discourse of "saving brown women from brown men," which hardly succeeds from liberating them.⁴² This could be measured perhaps by asking: If African women were to run the African continent, would that result in liberating Africa from the structures that marginalize the continent from economic and political roles at a global level? The narrative seems less forthcoming, perhaps, for it simply shift the blame to African men. It's doubtful whether African women who are constructed as fat are spared from the same ideology that informs the narrative characterisation of men. It is notable that the ending of the first volume seem to equate Precious Ramotswe with Africa. This final scene describes her fiancé, Mr J.L.B. Matekoni:

He looked at her in the darkness, at this woman who was everything to him—mother, Africa, wisdom, understanding good things to eat, pumpkins, chicken, the smell of sweet cattle breath, the white sky across the endless, endless bush, and the giraffe that cried, giving tears for women to daub their baskets; O Botswana, my country, my place.⁴³

She becomes Africa. She is the continent.

Yet a more critical response would be to ask: Does Precious Ramotswe offer a viable solution through her *Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* that seeks to solve the mysteries of people through peace and reconciliation, without necessarily seeking justice? Well, historically people could point at South Africa in response, as the novel itself does. But that is no comfort zone, for others will argue that the current South African liberation from the apartheid system has not empowered the most underprivileged groups. That is, black people still remain landless.⁴⁴ If

⁴¹ McCall Smith, *Tears of the Giraffe*, 117.

⁴² Gaytri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 90-104.

⁴³ McCall Smith, *The Number 1 Ladies'*, 235.

⁴⁴ Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "Dealing Lightly with the Wound of my People: TRC Process in Theological Perspective," *Missionalia* 25/3 (1997): 324-342, has written critically about the South African Peace and Reconciliation process as a

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Precious Ramotswe is Africa, indeed the continent itself, then her model, the ladies' detective agency that solves people's mysteries and reconciles them, still falls short, for the stories do not cease to underline that she is doing a great job but nonetheless is not making much money. Sometimes she does not charge people, sometimes she undercharges them, and at other times there are no customers. But she runs her business, which is more like a calling to unite and reconcile people than to make a profit. In Precious Ramotswe, then, the novel reduces continental troubles to the failings of African men, thereby eliding the colonial, neo-colonial, and globalization structures of exploitation and oppression. And worse, Precious Ramotswe as Africa in *The Number 1 Ladies Detective Agency* is serving the appetites of the Western colonial tastes and offers no liberation for the continent, for she is depicted as a puppet. Between Precious Ramotswe and Mma Makhutsi, her secretary, it would seem the latter offers a better model. She is a bright woman from a poor background, who continues to be sidelined because of her poverty and her color. But her approach brings her to the point where she excels in her own job: that is, she rises to associate detective, becomes an effective manager of J.L.B. Matekoni's garage when he became too depressed to work, and later begins her own profitable Kalahari Typing School for Men.

A major question remains: do McCall Smith's narratives take as hard a look at historical colonialism and its current manifestation as he does at African men, who are lauded with crowns for doing a bad job with Africa? I conclude by giving two pointers to this question. First, McCall Smith's narratives do not abstain from colonial language, its literary themes, nor its ideologies and framework. A good example is the narratives' constant flirtation with Botswana or Africa being an "empty place,"⁴⁵ one that stretches endlessly. Then of course the major literary characterisations of Africa as the Dark Continent, the heart of darkness and place of misery are repeatedly used. In this language one hears echoes of Joseph Conrad's title *The Heart of Darkness* and its contents, where it is said, "when I was growing up Africa was big empty place. I used to point at it and say, I want to go there."⁴⁶ *The Number 1 Ladies' Detective*

model that did not do justice to the black South African masses, who suffered the most from apartheid.

⁴⁵ McCall Smith, *The Number 1 Ladies'*, 123.

⁴⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Bantam Classic Books, 1981. First published in 1902).

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Agency narratives do not abstain from indulging in colonial ideologies to feed the appetites of its Western readers. I quote just one example of many peppered throughout the series. As Mma Ramotswe follows up on the missing child at a traditional doctor, who is still named according to colonial thinking as a “witch doctor,” and assuming that the boy has been killed she says, “This was evil incarnate, the heart of darkness, and the root of shame!”⁴⁷ Who is speaking here: Precious Ramotswe or McCall Smith through *The Number 1 Ladies Detective Agency*? Or the ghostly voices of colonial othering of the Other resurrected to serve many hungry Western readers? This tea session with Precious Ramotswe highlights that Alexander McCall Smith narratives should be read through Rahab’s prism.⁴⁸

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⁴⁷ Ibid., 223.

⁴⁸ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist*, 121-124.

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