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Exploring Criminal Investigation Strategies in Smith's The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency: a critical analysis

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ABSTRACT

Crime, both white and blue-collar, is a toxic phenomenon that tends to eat away society's moral fibre. It is a world-wide cancer that has bedevilled and debilitated even countries which are considered to be highly developed. For this reason, nations of the world need to collectively enhance their crime-busting strategies to eradicate this scourge. This study, therefore, strives to explore criminal investigation mechanisms in the African state of Botswana through a critical analysis of Smith's *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* (1998). Mma Ramotswa is a female character who symbolises war against crime in the novel by establishing a criminal investigation agency. This article is undergirded by the Marxist Literary theory which advocates for the abolition of greed (crime) for social justice and equality. It is a qualitative study which has derived its credence from exploratory research design. Purposive sampling was employed to select *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* from other novels by Smith because of its relevance to the study. The novel, which serves as primary data, was then critically analysed with the finding and recommendation that crime erodes the moral and the socio-economic fabric of the society, and should, therefore, be eradicated for the advancement and prosperity of the human race.

Contextualisation of the study

Bloor and Bloor (2007:58) have this to say about text which should be embedded in a context:

It has been suggested that every text carries resonances of all the texts that have preceded it, and that all discourse is the sum of past discourse. A text is also

said to stand in contrast to all other texts since it reflects the specific context of its creation.

Bloor and Bloor imply that there is a significant relationship between the meaning of a text and context of utterance because meaning is constructed from context-based language. In other words, text and context are semantically intertwined. Bloor and Bloor (2007:17) further aver that context of utterance is a “full discursual meaning” which help readers relate the sense of the text to the authentic world of the author. In the first line of the novel, the names: “Africa” and “Kgale Hill” (1998:1), direct the readers to the African contextual environment that permeates the novel.

The following brief biography of the author of the novel, *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*, McCall Smith, also provides a valuable contextual background of the text. Alexander McCall Smith was born in August 24, 1948, in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia, which is today known as Zimbabwe. He acquired his education in the same country, at Christian Brothers College before relocating to Scotland to pursue law at the University of Edinburgh up to doctoral level. Smith became internationally recognised as a British fiction writer and as an Emeritus Professor at the University of Edinburgh Medical Law. He returned to southern Africa to co-found the law school at the University of Botswana where he spent the better part of his life. He became so adapted and attached to Botswana culture and customs that he made the country his home. His detective novel, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (1998), set in Botswana, catapulted him into an international novelist of note as compared to his other numerous novels that came after it. Crime and social injustice have always been concerning to him. For this reason, this study aims to explore criminal investigation strategies in the African state of Botswana through a critical analysis of his novel, *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*.

Summary of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*

The novel is a depiction of criminal activities and crime-combating strategies employed to eradicate these destructive activities. The most prevalent crimes occur on the domestic front. Like any other concerned, proactive citizen, Mma Precious Ramotswe gets immensely disturbed by the *status quo* to the point where she becomes a private detective in order to root out the cancer. She investigates mysterious criminal cases among which were the missing husband, conmen, and an unruly daughter, all of which she managed to crack. However, there was one thorny, hurting case of a missing eleven-year-old boy who was suspected to have been taken by witchdoctors for *muti*. Though her life was put under a serious threat by the alleged perpetrators, Mma Ramotswe did not flinch. She continued to dig and dig and unravel until the mystery was resolved. Her crime-fighting efforts did not go unnoticed as they earned her honour and respect in the community. She is called by the African prefix “Mma” which is an honourable way of addressing a self-respecting woman. It also symbolises a warm, caring and protective mother. Thus, Smith has given

her a label name in that her name explains who she is in the community (Goatly, 2000:235).

Mma Ramotswe inherits her father's cattle and sells them in order to pursue her vision of becoming a detective to help the people in her city of Gaborone. Her detective firm: The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, starts in a small funny little office until she meets Mr Matekoni to assist her. Mr Matekoni owns Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, the most well-known business that deals with car spares and other accessories in Tlokweng. He acts as Mma Ramotswe's detective partner in discovering the hidden truths about the nature of crimes which continues to plague Gaborone.

Mr Matekoni eventually falls in love with Mma Ramotswe after spending most of their times together. This development enhanced their crime-fighting drive. Mma Ramotswe continued to employ her eccentric approach of snaring suspected culprits with vigour. This unique strategy makes the novel more exciting and captivating as mysteries are unfolded to the readers.

The novel has subheadings which categorise its chapters. For instance, Chapter One "The Daddy". The subheadings seem to act as a promise of what to expect in the next chapters. Moreover, they may suggest the cases that Mma Ramotswe receives and analyses as she has to have somewhere to archive them.

Noteworthy is that the novel is written in the second person, meaning that Smith is the one who narrates the story to the readers. Therefore, there may not be any direct connection between the reader and the characters as they are being explained by someone else. For instance, readers may get the idea that the writer adds more of his own thinking other than letting the reader judge what is happening.

The Setting of the Novel

Botswana, which also assumes the role of a character in the novel, is depicted as an underdeveloped rural country without modern technological gadgets and accessories such as smart cell phones, computers and internet. The environment is portrayed, in the beginning, as economically depressed for Mma Ramotswe to afford fancy furniture for her office. She starts small and grows resiliently big in her detective firm:

Mma Ramotswe had a detective agency in Africa, at the foot of Kgale Hill. These were its assets: a tiny white van, two desks, two chairs, a telephone, and an old type writer. Then there was a teapot, ... (1998:1)

The description of the office is not appealing, even to her potential clients: 'a tiny white van, two desks..., and an old white typewriter'. All these aspects paint a gloomy picture of economic pain and underdevelopment. The diminutive word 'tiny' suggests inadequate resources while 'old' implies being out of step with modern times and therefore, useless. However, a jaw-dropping detective service of unparalleled innovation emerged from it. Noteworthy is the custom of male dominance in Botswana, as Smith illustrates.

It becomes threatening and unusual to the male-dominated patriarchal establishment in Botswana for a woman (Mma Ramotswe) to become the first black female detective in the country to be engaged in such a ground-breaking and pioneering investigative work. The fact that she is "...the only lady private detective in Botswana" (1998:1), is transformative in that it rattles the perception that some professions are meant only for men. Progressive men such as Mr Matekoni embraced the initiative and its newness because of its modernising element. It serves to empower women with its *womandla* flair. Traditional and conservative men poured scorn on it because they do not like change as, to their mind, it will usurp their male oppressive privileges and power away from them. Even a male lawyer who is supposed to be enlightened about gender equality issues, supports the perpetuation of gender stereotypes against women (Mogoboya and Masha, 2021). He asks Mma Ramotswe, "...can women be detectives? Do you think they can?" (1998:52). This bears testimony to the extent to which male supremacy is entrenched in Botswana. Women are objectified and othered to be followers and not leaders of men in society. This is structural gender disparity that borders on certain African cultural and traditional facets.

Chapter two of the novel reveals Botswana's rich culture, customs and tradition. Obed Ramotswe passes on a wealth of African heritage to his daughter, Mma Ramotswe by educating her about African identity, humanism (*ubuntu*), and how and why all these values must be preserved for the benefit of posterity (Mogoboya, 2019). Barzilai (2007:3) concedes that cultural identity gives equality, respect and a sense of humanity. Obed also outlines how colonialism has eroded some of these cardinal African values to his daughter. Blacks were oppressed and marginalised by the imperial governments. They were made to feel inferior and inadequate in the land of their birth. It is because of this colonial disenfranchisement that Obed worked as a miner for a meagre salary, without any benefits for a very long time, only to die without any health care as witnessed by his inability to afford his daily medical bills. Smith writes, "The mines sucked our men..." (1918:13), which means that men were drained off their blood, strength, energy and left for dead when they are no longer productive to the capitalist system. They were, thus, swallowed by the dark, unsafe, frightening mine shafts.

Botswana is dependant mainly on subsistence farming and livestock for its economic livelihood. In other words, it is delineated as a country that thrives on agrarian economy. Smith describes how highly appreciated children are when they look after goats, cattle, vegetables such as pumpkins, and traditional houses (1998:39). It is a traditional rural African setting which Lim and Morgan (2007:21) refer to as the "local color".

Theoretical Perspective

The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency derives its theoretical basis from Marxist literary theory which contends that classlessness in society is a panacea for

crime because it brings social justice and equality. This theoretical underpinning is due to the fact that literature is a theory-based scientific study (Ryan and van Zyl, 1982:12). To explore the novel and its context, researchers had to acquaint themselves with the socio-economic status and class in Botswana in relation to Marxist literary theory. This has assisted them understand causes of crime, strategies against it, and the role of race and class in this spectrum of criminal issues.

2.1 Class stratification

Class structure is one of the tenets of Marxist theory which decries classification of people according to their economic status in society. In other words, categorisation of people according to the haves and the have nots, the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated. Marx and Lenin and Steiner (1973) identify this as the cause of revolution in society, which in the context of this study, is the cause of crime in communities:

...as this crisis will inevitably coincide with great clashes on the continent, it will bear fruit of a very different type from all preceding crises. Whereas hitherto every crisis has been the signal for further progress, for new victories by the industrial bourgeoisie over the landowners and financial bourgeoisie, this crisis will mark the beginning of the modern English revolution...

Marx uses the England to illustrate his notion of class division, of the haves and the have nots, 'the industrial bourgeoisie over the landowners and financial bourgeoisie'. The haves who are selfish and capitalistic in orientation can even go to the extent of amending the law to advance their avaricious plans. In their greed to always amass more wealth at the expense of the poor, the rich entice the very downtrodden to join their criminal syndicates. This becomes a fertile ground for social disturbances and criminal activities as this study seeks to reveal. Thus, in *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*, Smith uses characters who either belong to the ruling class or the ruled class to depict crime in Botswana.

Critical Analysis of the Novel

This study explores criminal investigation strategies in Smith's *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* through a vivid delineation of what characters say and do, what other characters say about them and what the authors says about them. Lim and Morgan (2007:35) define characterisation as, "...the way a writer presents a person *or a phenomenon* to the reader". Characters are usually divided into round (main and normally heroic) and flat (minor and passive) who contend with a challenge in the book, which is crime in this case. Some characters are for the crime while others are against it. The novel, therefore, revolves around the following key criminal characters who get busted by Mma Ramotswe's crime-fighting agency:

The daddy

"The Daddy", which is also the heading of the first chapter of the novel, leads readers to a man who is desperate and longs to be taken care of. He befriends

Happy Bapetsi, who works at the bank, after she got a promotion at her work-station. His intention is to cause Happy to assist him financially without her realising it. The daddy is portrayed as an old, lonely, unhappy and poverty-stricken man who can do anything, crime included, out of desperation to get financial benefit. Smith alludes that the daddy's deplorable condition emanates from colonialism where young men and African people in general, were unfairly discriminated against, blatantly exploited and deprived of good education and jobs. Some of them were killed while others were maimed. This has made Africans live and continue to live in perpetual poverty and hunger, as it is portrayed in the daddy's character. Without justifying the daddy's unsavoury plot against Happy, it is abject poverty and deprivation which cause him to have these evil thoughts. Garba (2012:53) concurs that young black boys were never given any opportunity to explore what they were interested in during colonialism. He further explains that fathers were obliged to train and recruit their sons to be mine workers as they, like their fathers, did not have proper education to enable them to get lucrative jobs.

The daddy feels the irresistible evil urge to take advantage of Happy because of, *inter alia*, her father left her to her own devices when she was a "little baby" (1998:6). He worms his way into Happy's life by lying that he is her long-lost father who has now come back to her daughter (1998:5). He manifests a peculiar character in the house as in, for example, telling Happy that he is sick and cannot walk properly, but when happy is at work, he throws away his walking stick, jumps around in a show of strength and unusual excitement, and is disease-free. His behaviour is deceptive and criminal, and thus, borders on social injustice. He steals from Happy in that he eats food that Happy has reserved for herself to eat after work, without her permission (1998: 9). Happy's money and other valuable items in the house just disappears without trace since his arrival. Smith, through Mma Ramotswe's detective work, seeks to educate people not to be gullible but be on the lookout for fraudsters such as the daddy.

The boyfriend

Almost all the cultures in the world are in sync when it comes to cheating in romantic relationships. Even polygamous and polyandrous communities maintain that instead of cheating on your partner, you must marry. Promiscuity is, therefore, shunned because it wrecks families. The boyfriend is depicted as a loose cannon who sleeps around lustfully with almost any woman he meets, mainly, in shebeens and taverns. It is in his drunken and promiscuous state that he fights indiscriminately with people, girls fight over him with killings, injuries, among other crimes, occurring as a result of this kind of this shameful behaviour.

The workers

Smith reveals black workers who are hired in the big factories and deliberately hurt themselves within the premises of those factories in order to be fraudulently compensated. He uses the character of Mr Solomon Moretsi, who

intentionally cuts off his finger at work so that he can cause his employer to pay him 4000 *pula* (1998:153). This kind of corrupt activity is committed because of greed for money. People such as Mr Moretsi do not worry to lose some body parts for ever for an unguaranteed lump sum. This also borders on job dissatisfaction which is addressed in a wrong way, that is, by maiming themselves. As disgruntled workers, they, however, feel that it is better to fabricate injury-on-duty cases in order to augment the meagre salary they earn per month. This is fraudulent hence the need for MmaRamotswe's investigation to deal with it.

The lawyers

Although lawyers are meant to defend people's cases in courts of law, Smith reveals that they are, at times, also tempted to steal through white-collar criminal strategies which need a sophisticated detective such as MmaRamotswe to unravel. A law firm, which is expected to be professional in its work, displays dishonesty for the love of money. A lawyer assists Mr Solomon Moretsi to sue a company he worked for to be compensated for a false claim of injury--on-duty (1998:155). This implies that this very lawyer would also charge Mr Moretsi an over-the-board fee should this fraudulent claim succeed. He would do this knowing that his client does not know regulatory bodies which govern lawyers' professional conduct. This vicious cycle of the African corrupter and the African corruptee is shocking in the liberated African state of Botswana. It further shows that crime defies colour, creed and racial background. It is an evil instinct in humanity which needs the likes of MmaRamotswe to dismantle.

Kidnappers

Toseland (1982:205) states that the elderly and the young are equally to blame in doing acts of criminality while Baumer (1985:15) contends that though children and the elderly may be "toys" of crime, the elderly try to scale it down as their stamina is declines with age. Smith depicts a boy who is approximately eleven years of age and likes to go to the field (or bush) alone (1998:71). The boy is described as curious about nature and formation of objects (1998:74). He is, unfortunately, kidnapped by unknown men. The story spreads like wild fire all over the village thorough television and radio. Conklin (1975:101) purports that children are often unconscious of the danger that lurks around them. As it is a popular perception in many African communities, blame was quickly apportioned on traditional healers who are said to allegedly kill human beings for *muti* (traditional medicine) in Botswana. Smith (1998:76) declares:

Mr J. L. Matekoni shook his head. 'No', he said. 'That boy would have been taken for witchcraft. He's dead now'.

The above statement attests to the African belief in witchcraft killings. In most rural African communities, there is always this suspicious traditional healer who is feared and thought to be killing for *muti* hence this belief in *muti*

killings for acquisition of wealth and power. Mma Ramotswe's Agency endeavours to debunk myths such as this one.

Car thieves

Car theft is one of the types of crimes that Ferraro and La Grange (1987:80) refer to as "property crimes", which results in a loss or total vandalism of property. People get emotionally distraught after losing their properties to theft and vandalism. Some get killed while trying to protect what is theirs. The conversation between Mma Ramotswe and Mma Pekwa indicates that "car theft was rife, almost unremarkable, and there must be many women driving around the town in their husbands' stolen cars" (1998:125). The novel delineates a falsified story that Mma Pekwa's husband narrates, which turns into a joke between her and Mma Ramotswe (1998:124). Mma Pekwa mentions that her husband "said a man gave it to him. He said that this man had two Mercedes Benzes and only needed one" (1998:125). One detects dishonesty that borders on theft in Mma Pekwa's utterances which may make a person criminally liable in a court of law. It is conversations such as this one which assist Mma Ramotswe to nab her culprits in her detective work. This makes her an organic investigator.

Conclusion

This study has sought to explore criminal investigation mechanisms in the African state of Botswana through a critical analysis of Smith's *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* (1998). Mma Ramotswe is a female character who is portrayed as an epitome of war against crime in the novel by establishing a criminal investigation agency to deal with, mainly, domestic criminal activities in her city. The novel reveals that crime results from greed which is perpetuated by social stratification of people within communities. The rich want to maintain their status of opulence by criminally exploiting the poor while the poor commit crime to become like the rich. It appears to be a vicious cycle of mediocrity which Mma Ramotswe manages to successfully disrupt through the innovative crime-prevention strategies of her agency. Smith, therefore, recommends that for crime to be eradicated, society should be actively involved in the establishment of communities which have social justice as their central tenet.

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