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RAINER EMIG

REVERSE TRANSLATION – PERVERSE TRANSLATION? THE STRATEGIES OF ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH'S *THE NO. 1 LADIES' DETECTIVE AGENCY* NOVELS

Abstract

Are the successful detective novels by Alexander McCall Smith that feature a black female detective in Botswana examples of colonial travesty, or do they conform to the claims of postcolonial theory concerning a hybridity of cultural positions? Looking at the novels' representations of African identity and life and their attitudes towards the Western world, the essay asks about hierarchies and responsibilities, perspectives and ideologies inside a heavily clichéd genre. It uses methods deriving from translation theory as well as the complex theories of Homi Bhabha to investigate the mimicry that forms part of the novels' style and characterisations and their position in a postmodern world that is as open as it is globalised and commercialised.

Key words

Alexander McCall Smith; No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency novels; translation; postcolonial; hybridity; mimicry; stereotypes

In *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation* Susan Bassnett states that “by pretending that we know what translation is, i.e. an operation that involves transfer across a binary divide, we tie ourselves up with problems of originality and authenticity, of power and ownership, of dominance and subservience” (Bassnett 1998: 27). In his essay “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern”, Homi Bhabha goes one step further and argues:

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted

in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the ‘middle passage’ of slavery and indenture, the ‘voyage out’ of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of the Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. Culture is translational because such spatial histories of displacement – now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of ‘global’ media technologies – make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*, a rather complex issue. (Bhabha 2004e: 247)

By following Bhabha in taking “translation” to mean more than simply a linguistic exchange, but one that involves conceptual and cultural, in the largest sense of the term “ideological” issues, I wish to use seemingly trivial material to pose a tricky question: How seriously does, or indeed must, postcolonial theory take its central concept of hybridity? My test case is a set of detective novels set in Botswana and featuring the impressive female detective Precious Ramotswe. These have become international bestsellers in no time, reaped book awards, and were turned into a film and TV series jointly produced by the production company of Antony Minghella, of *The English Patient* fame, and the promisingly named New Africa Media Films in 2008 and 2009 respectively. So far, ten novels have appeared: *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* (1998), *Tears of the Giraffe* (2000), *Morality for Beautiful Girls* (2001), *The Kalahari Typing School for Men* (2002), *The Full Cupboard of Life* (2003), *In the Company of Cheerful Ladies* (2004), *Blue Shoes and Happiness* (2006), *The Good Husband of Zebra Drive* (2007), *The Miracle at Speedy Motors* (2008), and *Tea Time for the Traditionally Built* (2009).

The novels use an established Western genre, the detective novel, and translate it to present-day Botswana. This translation is not merely one that utilises the African backdrop as an exotic setting. The cases to be solved, the detectives involved (besides Mma¹ Ramotswe her equally memorable assistant Mma Makutsi), and the solutions proffered are tainted by the particular cultural concerns, norms, and rules of a society that is clearly shown as emerging – and quite proudly so – from the shadow of Africa’s colonial past:

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. This is what I am called to do.

Everything, thought Mma Ramotswe, has been something before. Here I am, the only lady private detective in the whole of Botswana, sitting in front of my detective agency. But only a few years ago there was no detective agency, and before that, before there were even any buildings here, there

were just the acacia trees, and the river bed in the distance, and the Kalahari over there, so close.

In those days there was no Botswana even, just the Bechuanaland Protectorate, and before that again there was Khama's Country,² 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 2003a: 2–3)

All of this would make the novels perfectly suitable material for postcolonial Literary Studies, and perhaps for Gender Studies as well. Still, there is a problem, or is there? They are written by a white Professor of Medical Law at Edinburgh University. Alexander McCall Smith indeed grew up in Zimbabwe and has lectured at various universities throughout Africa, including Botswana. He enjoys writing detective fiction that includes philosophical ideas. He also likes to create female protagonists, such as Isabel Dalhousie, editor of a philosophy journal and amateur detective in Edinburgh in the so-far five novels of the *Sunday Philosophy Club*. Yet his double travesty of inventing a female African detective figure keeps making the literary scholar somewhat uneasy. Unease is indeed provoked in a double way: one's initial gut reaction "This is wrong!" is equally instantly countered by the feeling that calling it wrong is equally misguided. One of the first things that postcolonial theory – in agreement with Gender Studies – tells us is, of course, that there are no essential identities. And no one would nowadays seriously claim that for a work of literature to possess a gender angle or indeed a feminist one, it must be authored by a woman.

So how do we deal with McCall Smith's novels, which present to us tantalising cases of cultural, linguistic, and also gender "translation"? After briefly reminding ourselves of Homi Bhabha's formulation of "hybridity" and connecting it with (or juxtaposing it to) his definitions of "stereotype" and "mimicry", I will use them for a close look at the structures of McCall Smith's novels, structures that exceed the figure of the main protagonist and extend into narrative ruptures and multiplicities and questions of perspectives.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity is fundamentally a two-way street with heavy traffic and some dangers for drivers as well as pedestrians (and not merely because of Bhabha's notoriously opaque style). In order to overcome the binary oppositions set up both by colonial discourse, but also by first-generation postcolonial critics (most notably Edward Said in his notion of Orientalism), Bhabha proposes a model of mutual influence, which is simultaneously one of mutual subversion of supposed coloniser and supposed colonised. He does not deny the power imbalance that is in place (something that Gayatri Spivak emphasises in her insistent questioning of even the possibility of subaltern utterances). Yet he argues, in a somewhat Heraclitean way, that you never step into the colonial exchange with the same identity twice:

Consequently, the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference. It is a disjunction produced within the act of enunciation as a specifically colonial articulation of those two disproportionate sites of colonial discourse and power: the colonial scene as the invention of historicity, mastery, mimesis or as the 'other scene' of *Entstellung*, displacement, fantasy, psychic defence, and an 'open' textuality. (Bhabha 2004d: 153)

For *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* novels this model appears to fit neatly. They are not concerned with fixing a notion of an authentic "Africanness": their Botswana is a developing country in a non-condescending sense. Its inhabitants are proud of their achievements and their country's status in the world, actively participate in cultural exchange and modernisation, but at the same time cherish traditional values, though not uncritically. Mma Ramotswe is a great example. She hails from a village where her father and everyone else upheld that breeding cattle is the highest goal in life. Mma Ramotswe cherishes the memory of her late father and sympathises with his notions, but she goes to secretarial college (which he supports), marries a man of her own choice (of whom he does not approve, but keeps quiet about it), eventually divorces him and sets up her own business in Botswana's capital as a self-employed modern woman, albeit with a soft spot for traditional customs (though not gender roles) and a noticeable degree of patriotism.

Modern Africa and its problems are also addressed by the novels in ways which often disrupt the expected logical linearity of detection. In the first volume the entire second chapter is a 15-page excursion into Mma Ramotswe's father's past in the mines of South Africa, with their exploitation, racism, but also solidarity among black Africans and even between them and some whites. It is told by himself as a first-person narrative, prefaced by the following remarks:

We don't forget, thought Mma Ramotswe. Our heads may be small, but they are as full of memories as the sky may sometimes be of swarming bees, thousands and thousands of memories, of smells, of places, of little things that happened to us and which come back, unexpectedly, to remind us who we are. And who am I? I am Precious Ramotswe, citizen of Botswana, daughter of Obed Ramotswe who died because he had been a miner and could no longer breathe. His life was unrecorded; who is there to write down the lives of ordinary people?

I am Obed Ramotswe, and I was born near Mahalapye in 1930. Mahalapye is halfway between Gaborone and Francistown, on that road that seems to go on and on forever. [...] (McCall Smith 2003a: 13)

Needless to say, such narrative digressions are utterly untypical of detective novels, especially when they are not linked to any cases to be solved. In fact, Mma

Ramotswe does not solve all her cases. In one involving the suspected liaison of the daughter of a rich Indian migrant, she is easily tricked by the teenage girl. Other cases turn out to have mundane rather than exciting solutions, and in the only case in which a suspected death turns out to be real, it is the result of an accident. Indeed, it often seems that detection is a mere screen for unfolding the limited set of characters of the “traditionally built” lady detective, her shrewd female assistant, her long-time fiancé Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, and the young men working in his garage. What also unfolds for the reader is a scenario of a culture in transition, but neither from any authentic African identity to a globalised or Westernised modernity nor from colonial dependency to proud independence. Instead, we are faced with a complex multiple shift backwards and forwards, and sideways as well, as far as issues of modernisation, globalisation, but also individual and collective structures of solidarity are concerned.

One of these instances of the intrusion of globalised yet also highly local issues is the mention of AIDS in several volumes. It is the disease that eventually kills Mma Makutsi’s brother. Yet its description is very subtle, as in the scene when Mma Ramotswe’s assistant makes her already ailing brother move in with her:

She had protested that it was no trouble, and that she liked having him with her, and that he could stay with her when he was better and found a job in Gaborone, but she knew that this was not going to happen. He knew too, she was sure, but neither spoke about it or the cruel disease which was ending his life, slowly, like a drought dries up a landscape. (McCall Smith 2003c: 35)

This subtlety, however, takes us back to the issue of translation, mimicry, and even cultural hegemony. Is this the projected perspective of a white educated writer (who, as a professor of medicine and a philosopher, is well equipped to handle the issue with considerable equipoise) onto the omniscient narrator of the text? Is it the projection of the desires of a white readership that prefers Africans to be accepting rather than upset about the disease onto the characters and narrative? The disease’s description as the equivalent of a natural phenomenon is indeed a case of problematic myth-making.

Other such contemporary issues mentioned in the texts are economically motivated migration, prostitution, and small-scale corruption. In general, though, one gets the impression that Mma Ramotwe regards Botswana as an only slightly imperfect heaven, South Africa as hell, and countries like Swaziland and Nigeria as purgatory: “everywhere you look, what do you see? Fighting, fighting, fighting. Rich people killing poor people; poor people killing rich people. Everywhere, except Botswana” (McCall Smith 2003a: 33). Again, the novels score in all the compulsory questions one would address to a right-on postcolonial text, and not merely those of content. Digression, multivocality, orality, metaphoricity are all in evidence. In terms of political correctness, they even go as far as having Mma Ramotswe and her fiancé adopt two orphaned bushmen children, one of them

even in a wheelchair – after mentioning in great detail the racist attitudes of ordinary Batswana people towards the nomads they call Basarwa. Mr Matekoni's maid (who will soon be sacked) indeed thinks to herself: "These people were thieves – she never doubted that – and they should not be encouraged to come and live in respectable Batswana houses" (McCall Smith 2003b: 99). And as if this was not enough, the text consciously reverses gender expectation when the small boy turns out to be artistically minded and useless at practical things, while his handicapped sister is allowed to do what fascinates her, work on engines in the garage of Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. There is even a funny attack on homophobia when the apprentices in Mr Matekoni's garage receive an anonymous love letter and argue about who is meant by "Mr Handsome" on the envelope. Mma Makutsi slyly intervenes and lies about the anonymous admirer: "I saw a man outside the garage this morning, first thing" (McCall Smith 2004: 149), after which the apprentices agree to bin the letter.

Does the text take things too far in its translation or reversal of expectations? Does translation become travesty? In order to address this tricky issue, it will help to consult once again Homi Bhabha, this time his ideas on stereotypes and mimicry. On the structure of the stereotype, when viewed from a position which is structural, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial, Bhabha writes:

The stereotype, then, as the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse, for both colonizer and colonized, is the scene of a similar fantasy and defence – the desire of an originality which is again threatened by the differences of race, colour and culture. [...] The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in defying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations. (Bhabha 2004b: 107)

In other words, the stereotype results from a refusal to enter the simultaneously constructive and deconstructive process, indeed the translation of positions, that is hybridity – or perhaps more correctly hybridisation. But are McCall Smith's novels busy subverting and translating positions, or are they carefully assembling stereotypes – the politically correct stereotypes of a kind of inverted racism and sexism? It is certainly no coincidence that the only encounter with white clients involves not a representative of the former colonial power, Britain, but an American mother who asks Mma Ramotswe to investigate the disappearance of her son. She also displays no signs of colonial attitudes; indeed it is rather Mma Ramotswe who comes across as prejudiced during their first encounter:

The woman took her hand, correctly, Mma Ramotswe noticed, in the proper Botswana way, placing her left hand on her right forearm as a mark of respect. Most white people shook hands very rudely, snatching just one hand

and leaving the other hand free to perform all sorts of mischief. This woman had at least learned something about how to behave. [...]

Perhaps she was an American who had lived for many years in Africa; there were many of these people. They grew to love Africa and they stayed, sometimes until they died. Mma Ramotswe could understand why they did this. She could not imagine why anybody would want to live anywhere else. (McCall Smith 2003b: 22)

The scene reverses the stereotypical narrow-minded attitudes of colonialism. But it also suspects the American woman of mimicry (“This woman had at least learned something about how to behave”), something that Bhabha – in a reversal of McCall Smith that aligns him with common views of colonialism – attributes to the colonised and not the colonisers. He writes:

[...] mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus[,] the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers. (Bhabha 2004c: 122–123)

Bhabha’s complicated argument asserts that mimicry is not merely a subaltern copying of dominant modes of thought, speech, and behaviour. The crucial ambivalence he postulates for it originates in mimicry’s structural basis in surveillance and observation, yet one that is thrown back from the colonised onto the coloniser: I am watching you all the time and can therefore act as you do. Translation becomes a double-sided process, a two-way street, when it ceases to be appropriation but displays a self-awareness that is also responsible for its disavowal, inappropriateness, and therefore ultimately excess. Here, mimicry meets hybridity again: “The metonymic strategy produces the signifier of colonial *mimicry* as the affect of hybridity – at once a mode of appropriation and of resistance, from the disciplined to the desiring” (Bhabha 2004d: 172).

McCall Smith’s novels are such a shift from the disciplined to the desiring: they desire access to a subject position that is African and female. But since they realise and consciously and structurally reject any formulation of this subject position as closed, monolithic and monological – and instead make it multiple, contradictory, at the same time patriotic and global, traditional and modern, etc., they do not completely fall victim to mimicry, but display mimicry as a masque or an affect (Bhabha uses both terms). They thus employ it to reverse positions without stabilising or privileging any position wholeheartedly. The novels are as pleasing as they are unsettling, Eurocentric *and*, rather than anti-European, largely dismissive of or indeed not even much interested in European positions.

At least this is what happens inside the tales they tell. There is a repeated ironic reference to Clovis Andersen's manual *The Principles of Private Investigation*, which is Mma Ramotswe's professional bible, but whose Western perspective regularly puzzles or even exasperates her:

The manual on which she relied, *The Principles of Private Investigation* by Clovis Andersen, stressed that one should never crowd one's subject. 'Keep a long rein', wrote Mr Andersen, 'even when it means losing the subject from time to time. You can always pick up the trail later. And a few minutes of non-eye contact is better than an angry confrontation.'

Mma Ramotswe judged that it was now time to go round the corner. [...] She turned round, and looked in the other direction. There was a car in the distance, coming out of the driveway of a house, and nothing else.

Mma Ramotswe was puzzled. [...]

She would ignore Clovis Andersen for once and crowd her subject a little more. (McCall Smith 2003a: 105, 107)³

In the same vein, the texts repeatedly mention Elizabeth II as a figure of veneration. Yet when one looks more closely at the reasons for this, the Queen is only considered wise because she supposedly had the wisdom to liberate Botswana. In the subsequent quotation, she is only present through the ironic medium of a teacup – a cup that even has to compete with a commemoration plate of Botswana's first president:

On the mantelpiece she had placed her best china, her Queen Elizabeth II teacup and her commemoration plate with the picture of Sir Seretse Khama, President, *Kgosi* of the Bangwato people, Statesman. He smiled at her from the plate, and it was as if he gave a blessing, as if he knew. As did the Queen, for she loved Botswana too, and understood. (McCall Smith 2003a: 132)⁴

The text shows Precious Ramotswe's understanding of the world as the ironic inversion of the self-indulgent Western position that regards all other cultures as a mere approving comment on itself. At the same time, the narrative of the novels is clearly geared towards a Western readership. Yet this is neither their flaw nor their downfall, if one follows the complex interlinked arguments proposed by Bhabha. They need to be structured by ambivalence, sit on the fence, though not too safely, translate across nations, languages and cultures – and even express the "ambitions of 'global' media technologies" in terms of their multinational sales and multimedia formats (an audiobook version is now also available, as are translations, among other languages, into Czech and German). This makes the novels enter a hybridity that is a true one, and not paradoxically one-sided, in that it extends to writer and readers too, in the way Bhabha proposes but which is often downplayed, also by postcolonial criticism. It furthermore offers us a healthy reminder that a postcolonial perspective is not one that miraculously, in an act of

Hegelian *Aufhebung* or sublation, manages to leave the colonial past and its attitudes behind. Instead, the “post” in “postcolonial” must itself be understood as included in this process of hybridisation, ambivalence, and translation. To quote Bhabha for the last time: “If the jargon of our times – postmodernity, postcoloniality, postfeminism – has any meaning at all, it does not lie in the popular use of the “post” to indicate sequentiality – *after*-feminism; or polarity – *anti*-modernism” (Bhabha 2004a: 6).

Whether one likes them or not, novels like McCall Smiths are valuable in using their complex and problematic translations to remind us of the colonial in the “post”, of the colonial in postcolonial writers, readers, texts, and even theory. Their often humanistic tone, which is expressed in titles such as *The Full Cupboard of Life*, is therefore deceptive, for their assurances (embodied in a sympathetic protagonist, happy endings, and politically correct acts and attitudes all around) are subtly counterbalanced by the uneasy feeling that what we are reading might be mimicry, more precisely the mask of a mask. Although we are invited into the tales, we as readers might be fools deserving pity rather than enlightened subjects in command of “‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers”. This applies to the writer, too: Mma Ramotswe’s laconic comment on infatuated Europeans and Americans, “They grew to love Africa and they stayed, sometimes until they died”, clearly also metaphorically applies to McCall Smith himself. It might equally well apply to readers and scholars of postcolonial literature.

To succeed in doing such unsettling work while balancing on the borderlines of the highly conventional genre of detective novels (the texts contain many nods in the direction of Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple⁵) is no mean feat for texts that manage to be thoroughly entertaining at the same time. So while the verdict concerning the accusations of reversion and perversion must remain an open one, it is exactly this openness which explains the success of McCall Smith’s travestied African detective stories. It also opens them up for fruitful debates on their potential essentialism and frequent stereotypes, but also their equally evident hybridity of cultural and gender positions and polysemy of imaginably ideological stances.

Notes

- 1 “Mma” is an honorary title in Botswana’s chief language Setswana.
- 2 Seretse Khama (1921–1980) was first a chieftain and later Botswana’s first president.
- 3 It is tempting to read Andersen’s advice also as a structural description of McCall Smith’s narrative technique.
- 4 A further colonial/postcolonial irony is the emphatic use of Khama’s title “Sir”, which was awarded to him by the former colonial power Britain, yet after Botswana’s independence.
- 5 “‘Women are the ones who know what’s going on,’ she said quietly. ‘They are the ones with eyes. Have you not heard of Agatha Christie?’”; “What would Mma Christie have thought if she had seen Mma Malatsi’s cool reaction, her virtual indifference?” (McCall Smith 2003a: 59, 84).

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RAINER EMIG is Chair of English Literature and Culture at Leibniz University in Hanover, Germany. His publications include the monographs *Modernism in Poetry* (1995), *W.H. Auden* (1999), and *Krieg als Metapher im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert* (2001) as well as edited collections on *Stereotypes in Contemporary Anglo-German Relations* (2000), *Ulysses* (2004), and *Gender ↔ Religion* (2008). He has recently completed a monograph entitled *Eccentricity: Culture from the Margins* and a co-edited collection on *Hybrid Humour*. Another, on *Performing Masculinity*, will appear in 2009. He is one of the three editors of the *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*.

Address: Prof. Dr. Rainer Emig, Englisches Seminar, Leibniz Universität Hannover, Königsworther Platz 1, D-30167 Hannover, Germany. [e-mail: rainer.emig@engsem.uni-hannover.de]