

Pioneering work on literary and historical representations of Botswana

Mary S. Lederer, *Novels of Botswana in English, 1930-2006*

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In this pioneering and informative book, Mary Lederer, an American literary scholar and former lecturer at the University of Botswana, provides a survey of novels written by foreigners and Batswana about the country. In an earlier chapter Lederer examines novels whose writers reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the changing national character of Botswana. A classic novel that Lederer uses extensively to compare and contrast with later novels by Batswana writers is South African statesman Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*, published in 1917.

The starting point is Andrew Sesinyi's *Love on the Rocks* which appeared in 1981 as part of Macmillan's Pacesetter series focusing on popular romance. This novel, which Lederer credits as likely "the first major, post-independence piece of literature written in English by a Motswana", and like Sesinyi's other novels, is concerned with the moral decay of the society owing to migrant labour and crime mainly originating from neighbouring South Africa. In terms of the gender dimension in Sesinyi's other novel *Carjack* (1999) in comparison to *Mhudi*, Lederer observes that "In *Mhudi*, the three most brave, sensible, and intelligent people are women ... In *Carjack*, the two most powerful and evil gangsters are women" (p 40). Comparative assessment is also done between Galesiti Baruti's novel *Mr Heartbreaker* (1993) and Sesinyi's works, and the conclusion is that longing for old morality is a common feature of the two authors. The irony Lederer sees is that the two novelists set their novels in Gaborone, a new post-colonial urban settlement which can hardly be associated with traditional morality as evidenced by growing debauchery. Focusing on the nation's capital makes Sesinyi and Baruti's approach a more nationalist project, says Lederer (p 15). She sees later Batswana women writers in the form of Unity Dow, Mositi Torontle and Bessie Head as doing a better job than Sesinyi in their critical observation of traditional values in the contemporary society. Lederer also sees parallels between Torontle's *The Victims* (1993) and Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*. She also argues that the nationalist approach of Sesinyi and Baruti is challenged by Head and Dow whose novels demonstrate how international boundaries are a hindrance to clan, tribe and family links in traditional villages such as Serowe and Mochudi.

In assessing novels by non-Batswana writers with regard to the extent to which their literature reinforces Botswana's own image of itself, Lederer is uncompromisingly critical. With the notable exception of Naomi Mitchison's 1965 publication *When we Became Men*, which sympathetically reflects on life in Mochudi, almost all other foreigners writing on Botswana during much of the twentieth century were primarily interested in either the Kalahari Desert or Okavango Delta. The people featured marginally in these works, Lederer observes.

In Botswana, in order to get the self-knowledge that is the presumed destiny of every white person who comes to Africa, one must conquer – or at least survive – the

desert. These novels illustrate the classic 'man versus nature' plot and conflict, in which the test of the self is played out against a harsh environment".

She further posits that: "The fact that other people live in the same environment and "conquer" it regularly is irrelevant to the central quest" (p 52). She concludes that: "What is written about Botswana by people with apparently limited experience of the place, without their own acknowledgement of their limitations, strikes me as dishonest" (p 90).

Another genre she examines by non-Batswana writers is the adventure or hunting literature which in southern Africa is traceable to the nineteenth century. Negative Western stereotypes about Africa also abound in this form of literature when it comes to writing about Botswana. She notes that a lot of adventure novels on Botswana appear to be motivated by the country's peaceful and democratic climate even though it is perceived as "wobbly" despite having been operating for decades without any military threat to it or civil strife (p 113). In particular Lederer is disturbed by Nicholas Monsarrat's novels among which is *The Tribe that Lost its Head* (1956), inspired by the well documented political crisis among the Bangwato tribe following the heir apparent to their chieftaincy, Seretse Khama's controversial marriage to an English woman in 1948. "Monsarrat unashamedly reiterates the mythology of the nobility of the colonial enterprise, in which men from England suffer countless hardships and 'servitude' in order to bring order to chaotic primitive life in other parts of the world" (p 96). Moreover, Monsarrat is accused of having an extremely negative vision of post-colonial Botswana and Africa generally whereby "well-meaning" colonial officials are persecuted, and chaos reigns supreme in independent Africa. To Lederer this portrayal is deplorable because Monsarrat had previously published well acclaimed novels.

An example of another novel that practically leaves the people out is K.R. Butler's *A Desert of Salt* (p 964). Lederer concludes that: "Even the most unyielding and unforgiving landscape can become a haven of love and peace if the people of the land are respected and loved, as they are for example in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*" (p 113). She further notes that "Botswana is a physically beautiful – and physically harsh – place, but it is Bo-Tswana; the place of the Tswana". While her annoyance with the adventure novelists' representations of Botswana is understandable, perhaps here Lederer ignores the highly controversial debate that counters the official portrayal of the country as having only one tribe: Tswana speakers.

Another genre discussed in Lederer's book is the detective novels of Alexander McCall Smith's series emanating from the hugely popular *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* (1998), and Lauri Kubuitsile's *The Fatal Payout* (2005). McCall Smith's protagonist Precious Ramotswe, also called Mma Ramotswe, just like in novels by Sesinyi, Baruti, Torontle, Head and Dow, is also concerned with morality. But according to Lederer, Mma Ramotswe knows that return to traditional morality would not have allowed a woman like her to operate her own detective agency, and she would have also been subjected to an undesirable marriage (p 14).

According to Lederer, the massive popularity enjoyed by McCall Smith's novels in the Western world presents serious problems. As she puts it:

McCall Smith's novels started to be read as representative of African literature. His nostalgic, romanticised view of the country and people of Botswana is read, not surprisingly, as typical of the paternalistic approach that characterises much of the West's interaction with the people and societies of Africa. Africa is often understood in the West to be a place of disease, war, poverty, starvation, and death (p 118).

She also observes that McCall Smith's experiences of people in Botswana was during his stay in the country in 1981, but the old morality of then has since given way to strong materialism with its obvious consequences. Perhaps it can be said that in a way McCall Smith's *The No.1 Ladies Detective Agency* provides a historical portrayal of Botswana of the early 1980s!

Comparing McCall Smith's work to Lauri Kubuitsile's *The Fatal Payout*, Lederer says that:

If Mma Ramotswe shows us the good possibilities of real life, then Lauri Kubuitsile's novels show the nasty possibilities of real life, in a more conventional crime/thriller style. Kubuitsile writes with the deliberate attempt to provide escape ... [*The Fatal Payout*] is a short novel, but contains references to many of the issues that confront Botswana at the start of the twenty-first century: rising crime, the belief in the tradition of rags-to-riches, rampant materialism, sexual abuse in the workplace, HIV/AIDS, extramarital affairs, expatriate (often South African) perceptions that Botswana is 'easy pickings', the rise of so-called passion killings, promiscuity, and so forth (pp 131–132).

To Lederer, McCall Smith and Kubuitsile's novels are not necessarily torch-bearers of African literature, but they can be appreciated and recognised by the Western world as "people centred" as opposed to the "desert and delta centred" works noted above. Literally in a footnote (12) Lederer observes that Abacus publishers falls back to animal stereotypes through animal drawings on the covers of many of McCall Smith's novels. Perhaps Lederer should not have reduced this critical and key point to a footnote (p 133).

In the final chapter of the book Lederer discusses works by Head and Dow and observes that the two female authors are the country's first novelists to attain international fame. According to Lederer the two authors write about the society from the viewpoint of the underdog and make a case for social justice. Dow boldly makes her underdog a woman while for Head the underdog is any individual at the receiving end of another person wielding more power (p 135). Early on in the book Lederer writes that "The sad irony is that Bessie Head is probably better known in the rest of the world than she is here in the country where she chose to make her home" (p 18). Surprisingly, she does not hazard an explanation for this state of affairs even though the answer could possibly be the society's notoriety for poor reading culture or "book famine".

All in all, this volume is a welcome development and refreshing read. Hopefully in the second edition of the book Lederer will include novels published beyond 2006, a period that has seen an "explosion" of numerous literary works mainly by Botswana from all walks of life.

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