



Confronting the Demons: Rituals Murder, Detection and Activism in Unity Dow's *The Screaming of the Innocent*

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Confronting the Demons : Ritual Murder, Detection and Activism in Unity Dow's *The Screaming of the Innocent*

Geoffrey V. Davis*

Michel would have approved of Unity Dow. He would have seen in her a writer who successfully combines a professional career and the literary life with social and political activism — a person after his own heart. As the man of passionate convictions and high public standards that he was, he would have admired her commitment to righting wrongs, to giving the voiceless a voice and to struggling for social change. No doubt, too, he would have been impressed by her ability to address urgent social issues and to convey progressive ideas through the medium of fiction. He would, I think, have recognised in this woman writer from Botswana someone whose life and work serve her fellow human beings and stimulate them both intellectually and politically — much as his did.

Such familiarity as most readers have gained with Botswana through fiction has usually been gained from the writings of the exiled South African writer Bessie Head, who moved to the country in 1964 two years before it gained its independence from Britain and remained there for the rest of her life. Head not only set novels like *Maru* and *When Rain Clouds Gather* and short stories such as those in *The Collector of Treasures* in her country of exile, she also revealed her commitment to her adopted country and its traditional way of life through important non-fictional texts such as her volume of social anthropology *Serowe : Village of the Rain Wind* and her historical study, *A Bewitched Crossroad*.¹ As an exile, what Head sought was an alternative to the South Africa of the apartheid era she had escaped, a place where she could, as she phrased it, “put down some roots in the

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1 Bessie Head, *Maru* (London : Gollancz, 1971) ; *When Rain Clouds Gather* (London : Gollancz, 1969) ; *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* (Cape Town : David Philip, 1977) ; *Serowe : Village of the Rain Wind* (London : Heinemann, 1981) ; *A Bewitched Crossroad* (Craighall, South Africa : Ad Donker, 1984).

African soil and [...] find a sense of peace about the future.”² She thought that in Botswana enough of African life and tradition had survived to make that possible. Accordingly the picture of life in Botswana which emerges from her published work is largely a positive one.

Recently attention has once again been drawn to Botswana as a locus of literary fiction through the worldwide success of a series of popular novels by Alexander McCall Smith. Volumes such as *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, *The Kalahari Typing School for Men*, and *Morality for Beautiful Girls* have achieved bestseller status.³ This is due not only to his creation of an appealingly homespun lady detective, Precious Ramotswe, who rarely has to deal with crimes of any great moment and is greatly given to drinking bush tea, but no doubt also to his appealing if somewhat sentimental portrayal of Botswana as a largely unsullied place of peace and solidarity where basic human values have been meaningfully preserved, a society quite at variance with the image of the African continent all too frequently purveyed in the press.

Neither of the two writers mentioned is Botswanan and Unity Dow, my subject in this essay, is quite right to state that in her country “there’s no history of writing fiction.” In that sense she is indeed a newcomer to the scene.⁴ And, one might add, one who will paint a much more critical view of her society than did either of her two predecessors.

Since Unity Dow’s life and work are not yet very well known and since her fiction is in significant ways intimately related to her profession, it is worth looking briefly at her career. Born in a rural village in Botswana in 1959, she went on to read law at the universities of Swaziland and Edinburgh. She has since had a distinguished career in the legal profession. She has been a prosecutor in the Attorney-General’s office and she was a partner in the first all-female private law practice in the country. As an activist she has taken a particular interest in women’s and human rights issues and has worked for the empowerment of women in many areas of Botswana society. One early initiative of hers was the establishment of the

2 Bessie Head, “A Search for Historical Continuity and Roots,” in : *Momentum. On Recent South African Writing*, ed. M.J.Daymond, J.U. Jacobs & Margaret Lenta (Pietermaritzburg : University of Natal Press, 1984), p.280.

3 Alexander McCall Smith, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (Edinburgh : Polygon, 1998), *The Kalahari Typing School for Men* (Edinburgh : Polygon, 2002), and *Morality for Beautiful Girls* (Edinburgh : Polygon, 2001).

4 M.J.Daymond & Margaret Lenta, “‘It was like singing in the wilderness.’ An Interview with Unity Dow,” in : *Kunapipi*, 26.2 (2004), 54.

Metlhaetsile Women's Information Centre in her home village. Dow herself recalls how the initial impact of the centre was due not least to the fact that it had come into existence at all ; that alone was sufficient to cause discussion and give the place publicity. At first women were reluctant to utilise its services because they were so unused to seeing such an institution in Botswana. An early tangible measure of its success was that the police agreed to set up a task force on violence against women.

Dow has been concerned with some important litigation in various legal capacities. In a famous case of 1991, for example, she appeared herself as plaintiff against the Attorney-General in challenging the Botswana Citizenship Act. That Act stated that if a Botswanan male citizen married a foreigner, any children would automatically acquire citizenship, whereas in the case of a female who similarly married a foreigner this would not be possible. Married as she was to an American Peace Corps volunteer and with her own children denied citizenship under the Act, Dow used her position to demonstrate how the law infringed the Constitution and discriminated against women's maternal rights. The case, which Dow won, attracted a good deal of attention from international human rights lawyers.

In 1998 Unity Dow was appointed to a life-time position as a High Court Judge. As the first female to be named to the High Court, she regards the appointment as having more general significance for women in Botswana. As she put it in an interview, there are many women in the country who think women *should* hold such positions : "it meant more than just me."⁵ In the same interview she discounted any notion that her appointment might have been a government manoeuvre to silence an outspoken critic. "If you don't trust somebody," she said, "you don't make them a judge."⁶

Since her appointment Unity Dow has coordinated a research project on Women and Law in Southern Africa focussing on human rights for women in six countries ; she has been elected to the International Commission of Jurists in 2004 and to its Executive Committee in 2006 ; and she has been awarded an honorary doctorate of law from Kenyon College, Ohio. Most recently she was one of the three judges presiding over what she has described as "the most expensive and longest-running law trial this country has ever dealt with."⁷ This was a remarkable case in which Bushmen were fighting for the right to remain on their reserve in the central Kalahari and to preserve their ancient way of life as hunter- gatherers rather

5 Bert Lockwood, "An Interview with the Hon.Ms Unity Dow" (live recording) at www.law.uc.edu/morgan/newsdir/dow020515.

6 Lockwood, "An Interview with the Hon.Ms Unity Dow."

7 David Beresford, "Judge Unity Dow on Botswana's most expensive trial," *The Observer*, December 17, 2006.

than be forcibly relocated by the government. In finding in favour of the Bushmen, Dow commented that the case was “ultimately about a people demanding dignity and respect. It is a people saying in essence : ‘our way of life may be different, but it is worthy of respect. We may be changing and getting closer to your way of life, but give us a chance to decide what we want to carry with us into the future.’”⁸ That statement alone gives some idea of the principles which inform Dow’s legal judgements.

To date Unity Dow has written and published three works : *Far and Beyon*’ (2000) ; *The Screaming of the Innocent* (2001) ; *Juggling Truths* (2003)⁹ ; and a fourth book entitled *The Heavens May Fall* is appearing in early 2007.¹⁰ It is probably fair to say that of these *The Screaming of the Innocent* has so far attracted most attention ; it has now also been translated into German and French.¹¹ There is not, however, as yet much critical writing on Dow’s work.¹²

It is, of course, not particularly usual for a practising judge to follow a second career as a writer of fiction, let alone crime fiction. Unity Dow has, however, now embarked on an increasingly successful career as a fiction writer, and it is with that aspect of her work that I am mainly concerned here. Some knowledge of her legal history and of the issues she has concerned herself with professionally will certainly prove useful in assessing her literary work, especially *The Screaming of the Innocent*, not least because as a judge she brings to her writing an exhaustive knowledge of legal process and great familiarity with all manner of crimes, including ritual murder. It is to that particularly nefarious crime that I should now like to turn.

Some years ago the body of a Nigerian boy was found in the River Thames. It had been severely mutilated in such a way that the police

⁸ Beresford, *loc.cit.*

⁹ All three novels are published by Spinifex Press, North Melbourne.

¹⁰ *The Heavens May Fall* (Cape Town : Double Storey, 2007).

¹¹ In German as *Die Beichte* (Munich : Goldman, 2003) and in French as *Les cris de l'innocente* (Arles : Editions Actes Sud). The German title refers to Rra-Naso’s confession in the final chapter of the book.

¹² I have discovered only two critical articles : Margaret Lenta’s “Postcolonialism in an Anti-Colonial State : Unity Dow and Botswana” in *Kunapipi*, 26.2 (2004), 34-46 and Elfi Bettinger’s “Riddles in the Sands of the Kalahari : Detectives at Work in Botswana,” in *Postcolonial Postmortems. Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*, ed. Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen (Amsterdam & New York : Rodopi, 2006), 161-179. There is also a useful brief discussion of *The Screaming of the Innocent* by Annie Gagiano online at : www.litnet.co.za/africanlib/innocent.asp.

concluded that he had been the victim of a ritual murder. Such crimes are thankfully rare in Europe and knowledge of them is scant. In basing her novel *The Screaming of the Innocent* on such a case Unity Dow is focussing the reader's attention on a crime whose frequency is thought to be increasing in Southern Africa, particularly in Botswana and South Africa. In South Africa where there has been much concern about the rise of such crimes, so much so that the one of the first post-liberation tasks of the African National Congress was to establish a Commission of Inquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murder in the Northern Province,¹³ the crime of ritual murder is also known as *muti* killing. It is worth citing a definition of what the Zulu word *muti* (or the Setswana equivalent *dipheko*, which Dow uses) means. The *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* defines it as "a substance or object which has or is believed to have curative, preventive, protective or harmful powers of a medicinal or supernatural kind; esp. medicines or charms traditionally used among the black peoples of Africa, made usu. of plants or animal parts, and sometimes, reportedly, of parts of the human body."¹⁴ Accordingly, ritual murder is "a murder carried out for the purpose of obtaining body parts to be used in the making of *muti*."¹⁵

The belief behind the practice of ritual murder is that a person who can obtain the relevant body parts — the parts normally being "harvested" from a girl who is ideally about 14 years old and being obtained while the child is still alive — can have them used by a traditional bush doctor or witchdoctor in the preparation of a potion which will strengthen him, for instance, in achieving political office or obtaining a better social status or business advantage. Occult crimes of this sort are always related to power in this way.

It is difficult to establish the frequency of such crimes, particularly as the police rarely find the bodies and the criminals are seldom brought to trial. There have however been calls in Botswana both for a specialized police unit, such as already exists in South Africa, to deal with such occult

13 Cf. John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, « Policing Culture, Cultural Policing : Law and Social Order in Postcolonial South Africa » in *Law and Social Inquiry*, 29 (2004), 513. The Comaroffs' absorbing article is primarily concerned with what they term "the incommensurability between a European national law founded on liberal principles and vernacular African beliefs in the occult, beliefs that defy investigation or interrogation under the usual terms of Western legal reason." (530)

14 *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 484.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 598.

crimes and for changes in the law to ensure that it is “sensitive to religiously inspired crimes.”¹⁶

It is important to note some of the accompanying features common to such murders. Most of the cases generally do not come to court and thus remain unresolved. It has been suggested that “the police, far from working hard to get to the bottom of the ritual murder cases seem to be putting every effort at protecting the perpetrators of the crimes.” There is also a widespread belief that the perpetrators of such crimes are to be found amongst the richer members of society.¹⁷ The fact that traditional healers or diviners are presumed to be involved is significant. Recourse to them has long been normal social practice in Southern African society ; they are consulted by rural people “to divine the cause of affliction, to guard against attack, to give a competitive edge over rivals and to ensure their own well-being.”¹⁸ At the same time their involvement generates fear of their supposedly supernatural powers. Such fears are sometimes shared by the police themselves. The South African inquiry into ritual murder found for example that “the majority of black police believe in witchcraft and are reluctant to intervene when suspects are attacked.”¹⁹ Unity Dow herself referred to this aspect when she remarked in an interview that “it would take a very brave police officer to go and arrest a very prominent traditional doctor.”²⁰ Elsewhere she has expressed her scepticism about their role and the beliefs which lead people to consult them.²¹

Asked in 2004 about her accusation (which is advanced in the novel) that ritual murder is a crime everyone knows about, Unity Dow responded :

Of course everyone knows that it happens, as everyone knows that traffic accidents happen. It happens. Kids disappear all the time — everyone knows it happens. It’s in the papers that a child disappeared, and then when the body is found it’s reported that the genitalia were missing and the tongue was

¹⁶ See Gordon Kemberly, “Botswana : Occult Busting Unit for Police” in *Mmegi/The Reporter* (Gaborone), 11 January 2007.

¹⁷ Both points are made by James Mathokgwane among others. Cf. *Africanews* for May 1997, available online at http://web.peacelink.it/afrinews/14_issue/p4.html.

¹⁸ John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, “Policing Culture, Cultural Policing,” 519. In the novel Dow shows the degree of acceptance traditional healers enjoy. They are consulted even by the police, but they are also shown as abusing their position, as Mma-Neo’s experience of being raped by one shows

¹⁹ John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, “Policing Culture, Cultural Policing,” 524.

²⁰ Lockwood, “An Interview with the Hon. Ms Unity Dow”.

²¹ For example, in her interview with Astrid Reinberger, where she stated : “ There are some very good herbal specialists among them, who know a lot about roots and their use in healing methods. And there are a very few psychologists amongst them. In general, however, I have a problem with a belief system which makes others responsible for one’s own illness or one’s own misfortune,” pp. 496-97, (my translation).

missing, and that the police suspect ritual killing ; but that's the end. It's not as though it's kept a secret that a child has disappeared — it's very obvious.²²

Speaking about such cases in her Cincinnati interview Dow recalled that in 1984 she was herself present in court when such a case was tried and she also referred to a conviction handed down in 1996, when an uncle, who had taken body parts from his own niece, was sentenced to death.²³ In discussing ritual murder in Botswana several commentators refer to the particular case of the fourteen-year-old Segametsi Mogotsi who was killed in Mochudi in 1994, an incident which provoked riots on the part of her fellow students.²⁴ Elfi Bettinger thinks that Dow is consciously taking up this specific case in *The Screaming of the Innocent*.²⁵

Although Unity Dow stresses that the vast majority of people in Botswana forthrightly condemn such practices,²⁶ she argues that “the issue does not have the focus it deserves.”²⁷ Her concern is the degree of toleration on the part of Botswana society that allows such things to happen. And that is of course why she wrote the novel.

The story the novel has to tell is a little complicated. The time is 1994, the place is a small village in northern Botswana on the edge of the Okavango. As the story opens, we are introduced to three men. They have in common that, although they have achieved a measure of success in their chosen careers, each of them desires to further enhance his position in society. The businessman, Mr. Disanka, wants to expand his butcher's business ; the Head Man of Diphukwi village, Mothlababusa Bokae, longs to become chief ; the deputy headmaster Mr Molatedi Sebaki, wishes to succeed to the headmastership of his school. None of them appears to have any moral qualms about the methods he is prepared to resort to in order to achieve his aim. So together they conspire to commit what in the Setswana

²² M.J.Diamond & Margaret Lenta, “‘It was like singing in the wilderness.’ An Interview with Unity Dow,” in : *Kunapipi*, 26.2 (2004), 53.

²³ Lockwood, “An Interview with the Hon. Ms Unity Dow”.

²⁴ Mpho G. Molomo gives a brief account of this in an article entitled “Civil-Military Relations in Botswana's Developmental State”, in *African Studies Quarterly*, available online at www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v5/v5i2a3.htm.

²⁵ Elfi Bettinger, *loc.cit.*, p. 177.

²⁶ In an interview with German student Astrid Reinberger contained in a report on her stay in Botswana entitled “Von Überlebensstrategien im Alltag und der Ankunft in der Informationsgesellschaft,” pp. 494-497. Available online at www.heinz-kuehn-stiftung.de/pdf.jahrb18_16.pdf. Here p. 495. The original text is in German.

²⁷ Lockwood, “An Interview with the Hon. Ms Unity Dow”.

language is known as *dipheko* and in English as “ritual murder”. In the belief that the removal of body parts such as the breasts, the genitalia and the anus of a young girl who is a virgin and still alive during the mutilation will, when used in the preparation of a medical potion by a traditional doctor, strengthen them in their endeavours, they enlist the unwilling aid of an impoverished elderly man, Rra-Naso, through bribery and coercion to identify a potential victim, Neo Kakang. After they have performed the deed, Rra-Naso, on the spur of the moment and undetected by the others, takes Neo’s clothes and, equally spontaneously, later throws them away in the bush. The perpetrators take the body parts to Mr Disanka’s butchery, where on their arrival in the dead of night they are accidentally witnessed unbeknownst to them by Mr Disanka’s teenage daughter, Lesego. Her worst suspicions as to her father’s complicity in the crime of *dipheko* are confirmed by subsequent television reports on the disappearance of the young girl from the village. Revolted by her father’s deed, Lesego reacts by requesting her parents to send her away to boarding school far to the south. The clothes which Rra-Naso has thrown away are later found and handed over to the police, but when Neo’s mother, Mma-Neo, arrives to identify them they are found to have vanished. Two weeks later a poorly briefed detective sergeant (Senai) comes to the village to report that the police are assuming that Neo was taken by animals and that the case is being closed. He has no knowledge of any clothes, is seriously embarrassed by the villagers’ questions about them and returns to the police station incensed that he had not been provided with full information. These contradictions in the behaviour of the police lead the villagers to suspect that they are guilty of attempting to cover up a killing and, angry that they no longer have any means of proving it since the clothes are lost, they resort to violence, which is suppressed by paramilitaries. No further action is taken, no arrests are made and no one is ever brought to trial. The case is never resolved to the villagers’ satisfaction.

Five years later a bright young woman from Gaborone, Amantle Bokaa, is sent to do her national service (known in Botswana as *Tirelo Sechaba*) at the health clinic in the same remote village in the northern part of the country where the girl had disappeared. When she is given the task of cleaning out a long neglected storeroom at the clinic, a box marked “Neo Kakang CRB 45/94” comes to light. As it turns out, it contains the missing girl’s blood-stained clothing. The angry villagers demand explanations from the police. Amantle is summoned to the police station to explain what has happened and subsequently acts as a go-between between the villagers and the police. She enlists the aid of a young female lawyer, Boitumelo Kukama from Gaborone, in whose practice she had previously spent some time as a student gaining work experience. The two nurses who had first instructed Amantle to clean out the storeroom, and for whom in the light of their high-

handed treatment of the villagers the latter feel nothing but disdain, are as government employees effectively held hostage by the village community. Police efforts to persuade the head of the national service organisation, Mrs Molapo, to have Amantle transferred out of their district, raise her suspicions. The villagers decide to address a petition to the Minister for Safety and Security, Mr Mading. In the meantime, he calls a high-level conference in the capital with the Chief of Police, the Deputy Attorney-General and the director of *Tirelo Sechaba*, Mrs Molapo to decide on their course of action. The outcome of the conference is a proposal from the Minister proposes that a *kgotla* or community meeting be held at the village, but he fails to mention that the idea is not his own deliberations but results from a demand made by the villagers.

Meanwhile in the northern bush Amantle meets the lawyer from Gaborone, who has been joined at some risk to her career by a young state counsel from the Attorney-General's office, Naledi Binang. Camped out in the bush some miles from the village they debate their strategy for the *kgotla* on the following day. They are firmly convinced, as are the villagers, that they are dealing with a case of ritual murder and that the police must have connived in a cover-up.

The village meeting is attended by the villagers themselves, by Amantle in company with her legal friends from Gaborone, and by government officials, including the Minister himself. Also on the VIP stand are Mr Disanka, the businessman and Head Man Bokae. Almost hidden in the crowd of villagers but noticeable because of her city clothes is Lesego, who has returned to the village for the meeting. In his speech the Minister concedes that the police had made mistakes in their handling of the case, but he attributes these to the kind of fear all people feel in alleged cases of ritual murder rather than to any desire to conceal what had actually happened on the part of the police. He asks the villagers to hand over the new evidence in the form of the girl's clothes (which they do), to cooperate in the renewed investigation, and to release the nurses. Boitumelo responds by articulating the villagers' demands : how did it come about that the clothes were in the clinic ? Where were they before then ? Which police officers had falsified the records and lied to Mma-Neo about the fate of her daughter ? The Minister then produces the officers who were involved in the investigation at the time, but again excuses their actions on the grounds of the fear they had felt. He promises that he will personally oversee the renewed investigation.

Naledi, who meanwhile has become curious about Lesego's evidently emotional reaction to all of this, approaches her in the crowd and tries to find out who she is and what her interest in the case is – without success.

As the group of young women debate the events of the day later on and Naledi happily accepts a job in Boitumelo's legal practice, Rra-Naso

appears. Throughout the years since Neo's "disappearance" he has acted as a stalwart friend to Mma-Neo, providing moral support and sharing her pain. Now he asks them to listen without interruption to his story, which they take down in writing and record on videotape. It takes the form of a confession. Rra-Naso reveals his own participation in the ritual murder, relating in gruesome detail how he was pressurised into becoming an accomplice and how Neo met her death. He tells how unnoticed by the others he took her clothes and later threw them away in the bush. He also describes the trauma which the event has induced in his mind ; ever since he has been haunted by Neo's screaming. And finally he reveals the names of the culprits, astonishing the group when he names as the one who arrived at the scene after the murder to be given a piece of the body parts the Minister of Safety and Security himself. The next day the body of the old man is discovered hanging from a tree and Amantle faces the task of telling Mma-Neo and the villagers why he has committed suicide. She also has to admit that she has failed in her task, since they have been tricked by the Minister and are no longer in possession of the evidence.

Some reviewers have had difficulty in deciding what type of novel *The Screaming of the Innocent* actually is. A review of the French edition puts the problem succinctly : "Le roman de Unity Dow est un inclassable. S'il s'agit assurément d'un roman policier de qualité avec suspense, rebondissements et personnages hauts en couleur, il s'agit aussi d'un portrait du Botswana."²⁸ Although it is of course correct to imply that the novel has considerably more to offer than a traditional crime novel, it is nevertheless the case that it does display elements which we normally expect to encounter in the genre of crime or detective fiction.

What are they ? Firstly, of course, we have a murder of a particularly gruesome sort committed in mysterious circumstances. Since there is no body and no evidence, it is also one which has remained unsolved for years. We also have a degree of suspense since we follow a process of detection which proceeds from the discovery of such evidence and — initially at least — holds out hope that the mystery may finally be explained. In this case we know from the start who three of the culprits are since we witness their conspiracy that sets events in train ; we know that they will stop at nothing to achieve their aims and we also see them using bribery and intimidation to secure their reluctant accomplice's cooperation. The fact that we do know

²⁸ Diane Saint-Réquier, "Les cris de l'innocente de Unity Dow. Justice contre tradition." www.maisondesjournalistes.org/lire_cris_innocente.php. *Jeune afrique* described the work as "un polar". cf. www.jeuneafrique.com.

who they are serves to focus our attention on the process of detection itself and to suggest that there is more at stake than the mere revelation of the identity of the killers. We do not, however, suspect until the end that two other people are involved and in both cases the revelation of identity is wholly unexpected and quite shocking. We also have a corrupt police force, who we readily suspect of some degree of complicity in the crime ; in this instance their incompetence is compounded by their fear of the supposed powers of traditional healers. There is corruption in high places, too : those involved in the crime are people of reputation and authority in society ; the nature of the crime is evidently not one usually committed by people in poor circumstances. In many crime fictions where the police are shown to be inadequate to their task, there is often a person, often a private detective, operating independently and it is usually he — or she — who arrives at the solution. Here this role is taken by Amantle and her associates. And finally we have a confession in the final chapter : Rra-Naso confesses that he has been an accomplice to the murder, informs us in detail how the crime was committed and supplements information we have already gained from Lesego's eyewitness account of the murderers' return to her father's butchery.

All these elements are, of course, staples of detective fiction which Dow has used to good effect in structuring the story she has to tell. There are, too, a number of significant ways in which she breaks with the conventions of the genre. Prime among them is the fact that here justice is *not* seen to be done. Dow cleverly contrives the end of the novel to disappoint the reader's expectation, doubly so in fact, since no accusation is forthcoming from Lesego, who would be in a position to denounce her father and reveal what happened to the *kgotla*, and the criminals are not brought to trial or punished. Indeed, the final scenes of the novel hold out little hope that they ever will be. Only Mr Disanka, who forfeits the respect of his daughter and the unity of his family, and Rra-Naso, who commits suicide because he sees no other way to atone for what he has been a party to, pay the price of their deeds.

The Screaming of the Innocent may not only be compared to more traditional crime fiction, it may also be regarded as an example of postcolonial crime fiction.²⁹ The question therefore arises as to what

²⁹ Cf. Elfi Bettinger. "Riddles in the Sands of the Kalahari : Detectives at Work in Botswana," in *Postcolonial Postmortems. Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*, ed. Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen (Amsterdam & New York : Rodopi, 2006), pp. 161-179.

distinguishes such fiction from the more traditional variety. What might we expect from postcolonial crime fiction ? Two critical studies which have recently been devoted to this genre can give us some pointers. In their volume *Postcolonial Postmortems. Crime Fiction in a Transcultural Perspective*,³⁰ Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen suggest that “many authors have [...] broadened the theme of investigation to address issues of community, beliefs and identity constructions across geographic and national boundaries, including gender and race relations.”³¹ They refer us to the discourses of resistance and subversion which often characterise postcolonial writing and see in recent postcolonial literature a tendency to use “elements of crime fiction for “social” rather than “criminal” detection.”³² These remarks obviously apply to a work like *The Screaming of the Innocent*, which interrogates belief systems, explores gender relations and, rather in the manner of Gillian Slovo’s *Red Dust*³³ which thematises the kind of events that occupied the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, uses elements of criminal investigation to explore a broad social issue.

Ed Christian’s introduction to his edited volume *The Post-Colonial Detective* also has something to tell us about this recent variety of the genre. He views what he terms the “crucial distinctions” of a post-colonial detective as follows :

[...] post-colonial detectives are always indigenous to or settlers in the countries where they work ; they are usually marginalized in some way, which affects their ability to work at their full potential ; they are always central and sympathetic characters ; and their creators’ interest usually lies in an exploration of how these detectives’ approaches to criminal investigation are influenced by their cultural attitudes.³⁴

Admittedly, apart from Detective Sergeant Senai, there is no detective in this novel. Nevertheless, we may view Amantle and her friends as assuming many of the functions of a detective. As Matzke and Mühleisen suggest, Dow uses “a group of politically conscious women, rather than an intuitive investigator, as the protagonists to solve the crime.”³⁵ And in this function they do indeed display some of the qualities Christian attributes to

³⁰ *Postcolonial Postmortems. Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*, ed. Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen (Amsterdam & New York : Rodopi, 2006).

³¹ Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen, “Postcolonial Postmortems : Issues and Perspectives” in *Postcolonial Postmortems*, p. 5.

³² *Postcolonial Postmortems*, p. 8.

³³ Gillian Slovo, *Red Dust* (London : Viking, 2000).

³⁴ *The Post-Colonial Detective* ed. Ed Christian (Houndsmills : Palgrave, 2001), p. 2.

³⁵ *Postcolonial Postmortems*, p. 13.

the post-colonial detective, most especially perhaps in their marginalization as women and in the sympathy the reader feels for them as characters.

In addition, post-colonial detective fictions tend to be set in countries which have not normally provided the backdrop for such works, Australia, South Africa, or India, for example. Botswana certainly falls within that category. With the exception of McCall Smith the country has never been the focus of the crime genre.

As the above account of Unity Dow's legal career has indicated, she has always been much concerned with gender issues. This broadly feminist perspective is evident in many different aspects of her fiction as well. In her Cincinnati interview Dow spoke of her desire to orient her fiction to the lives and concerns of women and to show women acting in the public arena. In the figure of the teenage Mosa in *Far and Beyond*, for example, she felt she had "created a role model for other girls"³⁶ who could demonstrate that "you can create spaces" and that "change is possible." That is a fundamental dictum of her writing. The reader of *The Screaming of the Innocent* will no doubt detect similar principles informing the actions of Amantle.

The novel is particularly concerned to reveal the kind of problems the women have to face in Botswana society : a traditionally patriarchal social order ; deep class divisions between rich and poor ; widespread corruption in the administration and the police ; victimisation and marginalization of women throughout society ; an absence of morality ; the persistence of ancient superstitions even into the higher echelons of power ; and a degree of tolerance and passivity, which brings about a collapse of the moral order and facilitates sexual abuse and heinous crimes such as ritual murder. In such a society traditional virtues such as children's obedience to their elders can lead to death.

Most of the men portrayed in this narrative emerge from it extremely badly. Of those who participate in the ritual murder the first is a businessman who professes to love his family while openly maintaining a mistress ; the second is a Head Man who flagrantly abuses his administrative position and frequently helps himself to schoolgirls for his sexual pleasure ; and the third is a school teacher who schemes to bring about his headmaster's downfall and rejoices over his successful use of witchcraft when the latter is killed in a car crash. The police are shown to be incompetent, corrupt and superstitious ; the politicians seek only their own

³⁶ Lockwood, "An Interview with the Hon. Ms Unity Dow".

betterment. Only the old and terminally ill Rra-Naso stands out as a tragic figure.

In exposing the gender conflict (which is also a generational conflict) at the heart of Botswana society, Dow places great emphasis on the need for women to overcome their traditionally prescribed – and circumscribed – gender roles. She shows how Amantle, Boitumelo and Naledi as activists who oppose the hierarchical and patriarchal system resolve, even when at the end they do not fully succeed in their endeavour, to continue their struggle. She insists on the importance of education in producing young women who are capable of prosecuting the cause of female empowerment. On occasion, for instance in her dealings with the police, the reader may feel that the character of Amantle is somewhat overdrawn. As Unity Dow remarked in an interview, some people in Botswana thought that “she’s an impossible character [...] she’s too strong for a Motswana woman.”³⁷ But that, it would seem, was her intention. Amantle, with her educational background and her previous experience of student demonstrations and oppositional activity, is intended to demonstrate to young women readers that they can be like her, that “she is possible.” Naledi, Boitumelo and Mma Malopi are significant figures in this connection too. Naledi, having spontaneously decided to join the others on their journey to the north and involve herself in the case, thus risking her career as an employee in the Attorney-General’s office, draws the lessons from her experience and changes sides, as it were, by accepting a job with Boitumelo. She, for her part, will continue to run a lawyer’s practice which takes on cases that do not make much money but do benefit the population. And Mma Malopo serves the community by running the national service programme while rejecting the corruption of administrative structures. If these are women in process of successfully overcoming gender roles, it is perhaps worth pointing out that in her portrayal of the two nurses who deride their job and manifestly fail in their task of serving the village community Unity Dow also provides an example of how women should *not* exercise their responsibilities.

It is not part of my project here to analyse the narrative techniques deployed by Unity Dow in this novel. That has been done quite efficiently elsewhere.³⁸ One should, however, refer briefly to one or two aspects of the plot structure which Dow uses to good effect. The plot makes skilful use of

³⁷ M.J.Daymond & Margaret Lenta, “‘It was like singing in the wilderness.’ An Interview with Unity Dow,” in : *Kunapipi*, 26.2 (2004), 51.

³⁸ See Elfi Bettinger’s article in *Postcolonial Postmortems*, pp. 161-179.

flashbacks to shift between past and present, primarily to reveal the details of a crime committed five years previously but also to account for matters such as the birth of Neo as the result of her mother's being raped by a diviner. It is, of course, conditioned by the fact that the identity of three of the killers is known from the beginning. And it builds to a tremendous and unexpected climax worthy of any thriller in the shape of the *coup de théâtre* represented by Rra-Naso's final confession. A major effect of this, which only becomes apparent on a second reading, is that in retrospect it reveals every previous reference to the old man to be replete with dramatic irony and ambivalence. Thus, when we first encounter him he defends Amantle against accusation by suggesting that "God sent her to find the hidden box" (54) ; the idea that God meant the deed to be discovered will figure in his confession. Many statements referring to him now appear to be open to more than one interpretation : Mma-Neo's remark that "he'll want to know what the police have to tell us" (66) ; the physical description of him as having "a furrowed brow [and] twitching fingers" (76), the reason for which will become apparent from his confession ; the references to "the scar on one of his fingers" (77), which it turns out he sustained during the murder ; remarks of his such as "her killers are the ones to blame, no matter who they are, and no matter what anyone might think of them" (79), which in fact denotes an ever intensifying process of self-recrimination. Not to mention his reaction to the villagers' expressions of sympathy as he mourns the loss of the young Neo : "Rra-Naso reached for and squeezed Mma-Neo's hand. He then closed his eyes and furrowed his brow, as if in pain. It was obvious he was embarrassed by the villagers' sympathetic looks and comments" (118), which in hindsight is revealed as a particularly moving moment for reasons of which neither the villagers — nor the readers — have any inkling at the time. And there are many more such examples.

In *The Screaming of the Innocent* Unity Dow paints a comprehensive portrait of Botswana society both in its rural and urban settings and in the different social groupings who interact with one another.³⁹ She provides a critical survey of a whole society, its institutions and its social ills. In bringing together the concerns of Dow's professional life and her literary career, in giving literary expression to the professional concerns which have occupied her in her earlier legal career and latterly as a judge, whether these be women's issues, human rights, or the protection of children, the novel not

³⁹ See Margaret Lenta, "Postcolonialism in an Anti-Colonial State : Unity Dow and Modern Botswana," in *Kunapipi*, 26.2 (2004), 35.

only addresses important social issues but also indicates some solutions to the problems it perceives.

Chief among these is the question of female empowerment. The novel demonstrates the need for women to break the power of a corrupt patriarchy, to begin to take power into their own hands, and to assume positive roles in society. The actions of Amantle and her friends illustrate how such a process might begin ; as Elfi Bettinger has rightly pointed out, the process of detection described in the novel is seen to be "only feasible as a collective enterprise."⁴⁰ Amantle herself is shown as a role model in the struggle for gender equality, as an activist who resolves to continue the struggle for justice she began as a student.

If the potential for change is seen to lie largely with young people, the villagers also represent hope for the future. The institutions of the rural community such as the *kgotla* hold up ; their mutual solidarity binds them, even where their poverty and lack of real power circumscribe their possibilities of action.

The novel must be read as a warning, as a call to action in the cause of social reform. In a society where crimes such as ritual murder occur and justice is *not* seen to be done, the search for justice must continue. Fear and intimidation must be overcome ; toleration of violent crimes and a culture of silence must be ended.

Finally, in any assessment of this remarkable novel the role of Rra-Naso is particularly important. This is not only because of the key he holds to the unravelling of the plot but also to the tragic stature he assumes at the end. Regarded by one and all as "kind" and "gentle" — these two adjectives recur in descriptions of him — he emerges as an accomplice to the crime. His reluctant complicity, born of fear, weakness and poverty, raises the larger question about human kind's capability to commit such deeds. As he concludes his confession, Amantle ponders the ambivalence of the man :

[she] looked at the gentle old face before her : was it the face of a man full of compassion and love ? the face of a brutal killer ? the face of a brave man ? the face of a coward ? [...] Was he a monster ? [...] Is there a monster lurking in all of us ? And if we're so paralysed by fear, if we don't dare face this evil, who will heed the screams of the innocent ?" (214)

40 Elfi Bettinger, "Riddles in the Sands of the Kalahari," 176.