

# Detective Stories During Apartheid: H.I.E. Dhlomo as a Precursor of *Drum*

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**Abstract** This article aims to contribute to the discussion of English-language crime fiction by black South African writers before 1994 by exploring H.I.E. Dhlomo's relatively overlooked contribution to the genre in the first decade of apartheid. In particular, I intend to close read three detective stories written between the late 1940s and the early 1950s by Dhlomo, namely "Village Blacksmith Tragicomedy", "Flowers", and "Aversion to Snakes", and compare them with the more celebrated stories published by Arthur Maimane in the popular magazine *Drum* a few years later. Notwithstanding their different re-elaboration of the tropes of crime fiction, I argue that both Dhlomo and Maimane resorted to this productive strand of popular literature to reassert a claim to knowledge denied to Africans, saturating their texts with new local meanings and exceeding Western genre conventions.

**Keywords** South Africa. Crime fiction. Detective stories. H.I.E. Dhlomo. *Drum*.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 H.I.E. Dhlomo's Short Stories. – 3 "Flowers": Science Fiction or Crime Writing? – 4 "Aversion to Snakes" and "Village Blacksmith Tragicomedy" as Detective Stories. – 5 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

Crime fiction in South Africa has exploded after the demise of apartheid in 1994, as many scholars have noted (see, among others, De Kock 2016, 36). This strand of popular literature is endemic in post-transition South Africa at many levels: it is produced by writers of all ethnicities and spans different genres and formats, both fictional and non-fictional.<sup>1</sup> Notable authors include Afrikaans writer Deon Meyer, who started writing in the late Nineties and who is widely read in translation, Mike Nicol, Margie Orford, Angela Makholwa, and Sifiso Mzobe, to name a few (see Titlestad 2012, 691). If the growth of crime writing in South Africa after 1994 is actually part of a larger trend worldwide since the beginning of the new millennium (De Kock 2016, 36), the country's postcolonial condition provides especially fertile ground for the proliferation of crime writing.<sup>2</sup> As John and Jean Comaroff argue, “the dialectic of law and disorder appears inflated, and more dramatically visible” in postcolonial contexts, where “the dispersal of state authority into patchworks of partial, horizontal sovereignties is far more advanced” (Comaroff, Comaroff 2006, 41). As a consequence, crime fiction in post-transitional South Africa represents an allegory “with which to address, imaginatively, the nature of sovereignty, justice and social order” (20).

Following the upsurge of crime writing in and outside South Africa, the critical debate on the genre has recently gained momentum, also thanks to a more general scholarly reappraisal of popular fiction in the last few decades.<sup>3</sup> In particular, it has been widely debated whether contemporary South African crime fiction represents only a marketable, escapist genre or can also provide a social critique of the new South African predicament.<sup>4</sup> Crime fiction before 1994, conversely, is rarely taken into consideration in scholarly discussions of crime writing in South Africa. In his blog *Crime Beat*, Mike Nicol, himself a crime novelist and a literary scholar, opens his “Short History of South African Crime Fiction” with the following lines:

<sup>1</sup> See Rautenbach 2013 for a discussion of ‘true-crime’, a subgenre of literary non-fiction, in contemporary South Africa. Jonny Steinberg’s *Midlands* (2002) is a notable example of non-fictional crime writing in South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the link between crime writing and postcolonialism, see Matzke, Mühleisen 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Both the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* and *Current Writing* have published special issues on South African crime fiction in 2013. For a more global perspective, see the volume *Crime Fiction as World Literature* (2017), edited by Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D’haen.

<sup>4</sup> These questions have been addressed in the so-called ‘genre-snob’ debate. For a detailed account of it, see Rautenbach 2013, 155.

Despite the vibrancy of thriller and crime fiction elsewhere, not much has happened in SA crime fiction over the last five decades. Until recently that is. This isn't exactly surprising as the cops have been more or less an invading army in the eyes of most of the citizenry since forever. Certainly, come the apartheid state in the late 1940s no self-respecting writer was going to set up with a cop as the main protagonist of a series. It was akin to sleeping with the enemy. (2015)

Interestingly, Nicol directly links the lack of crime fiction during apartheid to the socio-political situation of the country. In fact, the genre is not new in South Africa, as the extensive study by Sam Naidu and Elizabeth le Roux, *A Survey of South African Crime Fiction: Critical Analysis and Publishing History* (2017), shows (the authors' survey goes as back as 1899).<sup>5</sup> Nicol's causal association of apartheid with a dearth of crime fiction, however, is critically to the point as far as black writers are concerned. Indeed, only one black author is usually included in the list of crime writers before 1994: Arthur Maimane, who orbited the popular magazine *Drum*.<sup>6</sup>

The Johannesburg-based monthly *Drum* was the most iconic South African mass publication in the Fifties. It was first issued in 1951 and it appeared continuously until 1965, when it was banned for three years. British editor Anthony Sampson employed mostly black contributors: Todd Matshikiza, Arthur Maimane, Can Themba, Casey Motsisi, Es'kia Mphahlele, Blake Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, and Nat Nakasa. *Drum* published extremely eclectic material that ranged from bold investigative journalism and short stories by South African and international authors, such as Langston Hughes, to love and detective stories and popular columns on American movies. Influenced by popular culture, Shakespeare, and the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, *Drum* style is characterised by "linguistic and generic experimentalism" (Driver 2012, 399). Its hybrid pieces of narrative reportage, for instance, are considered antecedents of the American New Journalism (see Cowling 2016). Even though *Drum* was never as explicitly militant as other coeval publications (*New Age*, for example), its fiction and investigative reports record life under the segregationist legislation. Moreover, the magazine's appeal to a modern, English-speaking urban black readership represented a clear challenge to the government's attempts to force the black population to return to a supposed authentic tribal condition.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Green 1994 and Davis 2006 also engage with apartheid-era crime fiction.

<sup>6</sup> See Le Roux's bibliography of South African crime and detective fiction in English (2013, 142) and Nicol's "Who's Who of South African Crime Writing" (2016).

<sup>7</sup> The popular format of the magazine has sometimes led to a misguided reception of its content as merely escapist (see Mphahlele 1990, 188). The reception of *Drum* fic-

Crime fiction was a favourite genre of several *Drum* contributors, whose narratives often celebrate the figure of the *tsotsi*, a young township criminal. Yet, only Arthur Maimane (1932-2005), writing under the nom de plume of Arthur Mogale, devoted himself completely to the genre, and particularly to the subgenre of detective fiction. He published three series of detective stories in *Drum* from January to December 1953: “Crime for Sale”, “Hot Diamonds”, and “You Can’t Buy Me”.<sup>8</sup> Maimane’s detective stories do not follow the conventions of the classic ‘whodunit’, as exemplified in the writings of British authors Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, in which the social order is always restored at the end of the story thanks to the detective’s reasoning. His fictions, influenced by US practitioners of the genre such as Raymond Chandler, follow rather the more radical formula of the hard-boiled, where the detective is often represented as a cynical antihero immersed in a violent and corrupt urban landscape (see Pepper 2010).<sup>9</sup>

The most noteworthy feature of Maimane’s stories is the narrator and protagonist O. Chester Morena, a black private detective working within Johannesburg’s underworld. A black detective who solves crimes, legally owns a gun, and restores the order is a subversive figure in the context of the segregationist legislation of apartheid South Africa (Guldemann 2019, 262) – Maimane’s stories were published only five years after the victory of the white Nationalist Party at the country’s general elections. Scholars like Tyler Scott Ball (2018) and Colette Guldemann (2019) have recently recognised an ethics of writing in Maimane’s adoption of the hard-boiled subgenre that goes beyond the mere function of entertainment inherent to popular fiction.

Starting from these considerations, this article aims to contribute to the discussion of English-language crime fiction by black South African writers before 1994 by exploring H.I.E. Dhlomo’s relatively overlooked contribution to the genre in the first decade of apartheid. In particular, I intend to close read three detective stories written between the late Forties and the early Fifties by Dhlomo, namely “Village Blacksmith Tragicomedy”, “Flowers”, and “Aversion to Snakes”, and compare them with the more celebrated stories published by Maimane in *Drum* a few years later. The crime fiction by Dhlomo and

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tions as “spectacular” and entertaining texts was famously promoted by Njabulo Ndebele’s argument on the “rediscovery of the ordinary”: “It might be asked why the vast majority of these stories in *Drum* show an almost total lack of interest in the directly political issues of the time. [...] The writers of these stories seemed keen only to tell fantastic stories so that readers could enjoy themselves much” (Ndebele 1986, 145).

<sup>8</sup> Maimane’s stories remain uncollected. For a complete list of the short stories published in *Drum* between 1951 and 1958, see Chapman 2001, 239-41.

<sup>9</sup> The hard-boiled variation, as opposed to the classical ‘whodunits’, continues to be predominant in the post-apartheid context (Naidu, Le Roux 2014, 5).

Maimane shares few interesting elements: both set their narratives in mid-century Johannesburg, choose to write in English, and adopt the short-story genre. Notwithstanding their different re-elaboration of the tropes of the detective stories, I argue that both Dhlomo and the *Drum* writer resorted to this productive strand of popular fiction to reassert a claim to knowledge denied to Africans before and after the institutionalisation of apartheid, saturating their texts with new local meanings and exceeding Western genre conventions.

## 2 H.I.E. Dhlomo's Short Stories

Before analysing the stories in detail, I would like to introduce briefly the figure of Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo (1903-1956). He was a highly prolific Zulu-language writer, who chose to write his opera omnia in English after receiving formal education at the American Board Mission in Doornfontein, where he imbibed the values and beliefs of Christianity and progressivism, which characterised the group of the so-called 'New African' intellectuals (see Masilela 2007). His work spans multiple genres: he composed thirteen plays, ten short stories, numerous poems, essays in literary theory, and thousands of journal articles. Unfortunately, he managed to publish only two literary works in book form, while his poetry, articles, literary criticism, and one short story appeared in several coeval newspapers.<sup>10</sup> Thus, nine short stories (out of ten) only became available to the English reading public in 1985, thanks to Nick Visser and Tim Couzens's influential edition of H.I.E. Dhlomo's *Collected Works*. While the scant criticism regarding Dhlomo's short stories may also depend on their belated publication, the writer himself seems to have disregarded the genre, for his thirteen essays on literary criticism only focus on drama, poetry, and the role of the South African intellectual. Thus, limited material is available to literary critics embarking on the analysis of Herbert Dhlomo's ten short stories.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, no indication of the date of composition of the narratives is provided in the *Collective Works*. Nonetheless, the stories' style and content, and their internal evidence, indicate that they were probably written between the early Thirties and the late Forties/early Fifties - in particular, "Flowers", "Aversion to Snakes", and "Village Blacksmith Tragicomedy" belong to the more mature group of sto-

<sup>10</sup> The play *The Girl Who Killed to Save: Nongqause the Liberator* and the long poem *Valley of a Thousand Hills* were published in 1935 and 1941 respectively.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of Dhlomo's stories, see Iannaccaro 2019 and Sullam 2021.

ries.<sup>12</sup> Dhlomo's prose fiction, unlike most of his poetry and drama, deals with contemporary aspects of South African life, in particular the corruption of city life, marital problems, the dichotomy between rural life and modernity, and between science and religion. From a formal point of view, they are all narrated in the past and in the third person by an intrusive and authoritative narrative voice with a rather formal and polished English diction. This represents a first important difference between Dhlomo's and Maimane's stories, which instead borrowed the jargon of American gangster movies and novels, and mixed it with *tsotsitaal* – even though Maimane (and most *Drum* writers), like Dhlomo, were mission educated and versed in canonical British literature.<sup>13</sup> Although written in a realistic style, Dhlomo's stories also deal with uncanny mysteries. This tendency towards popular fiction is confirmed by the melodramatic closures of most of the stories, which end with a character either dead or collapsed, as in "Flowers" and "Aversion to Snakes".<sup>14</sup> Most importantly, Dhlomo's more mature short stories often denounce the social injustices suffered by the black population: 1936 saw the promulgation of the segregationist Hertzog Bills, after which Dhlomo grew increasingly disillusioned against white rule, and 1948 the beginning of apartheid.

This article considers three texts that clearly show Dhlomo's deep interest for and bold engagement with science, mysteries, and knowledge:<sup>15</sup> all of them, and particularly "Village Blacksmith Tragicomedy", fall into the genre of detective stories, while "Flowers" can be also categorised as science fiction. If "Flowers" and "Aversion to Snakes" present some of the characteristics of the hard-boiled genre (a violent and corrupt city as setting, the presence of a femme fatale, the failure of the police), "Village Blacksmith Tragicomedy" follows (and parodies) the more classical formula of the 'whodunit'. Dhlomo was familiar with detective fiction: in the second and third issues of the *Reader's Companion*, the bulletin he compiled as Librarian-Organiser at the Carnegie Non-European Library in the years 1937-41, the writer recommends the detective stories by Arthur Conan Doyle and Gilbert Keith Chesterton to his readers (Dhlomo 1938a,

**12** "Flowers" was undoubtedly written after 1949, because it mentions the Durban racial riots of that year.

**13** *Tsotsitaal* is a hybrid street language originating in the Johannesburg townships in the 1950s, consisting of Zulu, Afrikaans, and English. It was often used together with expressions drawn from American crime writers such as Raymond Chandler (Guldimann 2019, 262). Maimane was educated at St. Peter's College in Johannesburg.

**14** According to the editors of the *Collected Works*, Dhlomo's short stories "laps[e] too frequently into melodrama" (Visser, Couzens 1985, xiii).

**15** The only other narrative that can be categorised under popular fiction is "An Experiment in Colour" due to its sci-fi traits. See Iannaccaro 2019 for a discussion of "An Experiment in Colour".

2; 1938b, 4). Dhlomo's reading habits and knowledge of world literature were indeed impressive. Together with the English canon, however, he also read African American literature, in particular writers of the Harlem Renaissance – he may have been in direct contact with Langston Hughes, a key figure for the literary development of *Drum* (Couzens 1985, 123).

Unlike Maimane's series centred on the figure of the detective, "Flowers" and "Aversion to Snakes" both focus on the criminal, and they are the only two short stories by Dhlomo dealing entirely with non-African characters: an Indian flower vendor and a white café owner. The choice of a white protagonist by a black writer of the 1940s is uncommon. "Flowers" and "Aversion to Snakes" thus represent an interesting attempt on the part of Dhlomo to explore a group of the South African population different from his own.<sup>16</sup> In particular, Dhlomo's choice to depict non-African characters as evil criminals who commit multiple murders and who thus participate in Johannesburg's corruption significantly writes back to racist assumptions of black persons as lawless individuals. At the same time, the two protagonists are not Afrikaners: even the white man is described by the narrator as "[a] short, stocky immigrant of the Latin type" (Dhlomo 1985, 471). In his two final detective series, "Hot Diamonds" and "You Can't Buy Me", Maimane similarly chooses a coloured and an Indian character for the role of criminals. Colette Guldemann's analysis of this strategy is worth quoting, as her reading can also be applied to Dhlomo's crime stories:

The only colour associated with crime that could not be named in a black publication in South Africa would be "white". [...] one might speculate whether colored and Indian characters were the closest he could get to naming whites as criminals [...] in apartheid South Africa. (2019, 271)

Johannesburg, the City of Gold, is represented in "Flowers" as the city of "gambling, greed and adventure", while the setting in "Aversion to Snakes" is the metropolis' "wild underworld" (Dhlomo 1985, 417, 471). One of the staples of the hard-boiled genre is precisely the "fallen urban landscape", where crime and corruption thrive (Scott Ball 2018, 22). By choosing non-African characters as criminals who succumb to the city's moral decay, Dhlomo undermines the colonial stereotype according to which only black individuals, deemed trib-

<sup>16</sup> The South African population was divided into four groups during apartheid: whites, blacks, Indians, and coloureds. The Indian and coloured people suffered discrimination from the white government, but could enjoy more privileges than the African people. The segregation of non-white South Africans into distinct, artificial categories was implemented and institutionalised through the Population Registration Act in 1950.

al and uneducated, could fall prey to the perils of modern city life.<sup>17</sup> Dhlomo belonged to the generation of black intellectuals of the 30s and 40s – the New Africans – who first promoted a new urban modernity, paving the way for *Drum*'s own representation of modern city life (Masilela 2007, 133). By choosing non-African characters to impersonate criminals, both Dhlomo and Maimane thus use the conventions of detective fiction to reassert black people's dignity as modern, urban subjects, and to defy apartheid's attempts to recast them in a supposed authentic tribal condition.<sup>18</sup>

### 3 “Flowers”: Science Fiction or Crime Writing?

“Flowers” is a long short story divided into subchapters and composed towards the end of Dhlomo's career as creative writer. The Indian protagonist, Naram Sammy, is uncannily fascinated by flowers – the whole story is replete with adjectives such as “evil”, “devilish”, “queer”, “uncanny”, and “strange”. In the first introductory paragraphs, the narrator refers to Naram's admiration of the Indian scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858-1937) for his contribution to plant science; the mention of Bose links the story's opening to the next scene, which moves swiftly to India where an “evil” scientist succeeds in an obscure experiment (415). As is the case with the short story “An Experiment in Colour”, therefore, Dhlomo builds his science fiction on real scientific theories and scientists.<sup>19</sup> In an epiphanic revelation, Naram decides to go to India to visit a long-lost acquaintance. There, he meets the unnamed scientist, who explains to him his “evil schemes” and gives him the casket of deadly poisonous flowers he created:

My knowledge would be your treasure-love. I thought I would use it, Faustus-like, to rule all Asia, not from a throne, but from a laboratory; [...] not by foolish, garrulous and ignorant governments [...] but by the mute, obedient and immutable laws of science. (Dhlomo 1985, 420)

<sup>17</sup> The phrase ‘Jim Goes to Joburg’, which became quite popular in South Africa after the release of a film with the same title in 1949, has been used to describe fictional works that deal with the rural black man's encounter with the white-controlled modern city (see Gray 1985).

<sup>18</sup> The *Drum* writers either mythologised the figure of the *tsotsi*, the township criminal, or they created the figure of the black detective, as in Maimane's case, to celebrate their urban identity.

<sup>19</sup> “An Experiment in Colour” elaborates on the gland theory developed by British scientist Sir Arthur Keith (1866-1955). It performs intertextual dialogues with the science-fiction novel *Black No More* (1931) by African-American writer George Samuel Schuyler (Thomas 2020, 65) and with Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) (Iannaccaro 2019, 402).



When the Indian scientist suddenly dies, Naram goes back to Johannesburg and uses the flowers to commit multiple murders and become “the invisible but autocratic king of Johannesburg” (424).

The final subchapters read like a detective story and focus on the deductive reasoning of detective Smith from the Criminal Investigation Department (CDI), who suspects Naram’s implication in the murders. When he is discovered, Naram shoots himself. “Flowers” enacts Dhlomo’s ambiguous relationship with science and materialism, which can be traced back to his concern over the dichotomy tradition-modernity. Dhlomo wrote many articles on the question of science, a word he used ambiguously (see Couzens 1985, 184). The article “Where Science Goes”, for example, written in 1929, is celebratory of science. The pieces written later, however, such as “The Threat of Materialism” and “Materialism is the Curse”, published in 1947 and 1948 respectively, clearly doubt the potential of science, which has vainly promised “a fairy-like world with unlimited possibilities” (Dhlomo 1947). Dhlomo’s engagement with science is political and inextricably linked to the ‘race issue’, especially at a time when the “association of Africans with pre-scientific and non-progressive ways of thinking” was used to assert their “ineligibility for common citizenship” (Dubow 2006, 178). It is not a coincidence that the emphasis on science characterises also the detective stories by Maimane: “Me, I’m smart. I know all the angles. [...] I played it scientifically”, the black detective Chester Morena claims in the first episode of the series (2001, 24). Maimane’s constant characterisation of his detective as extremely “clever” (2007) thus tries to defy the nationalist government’s attempts to infantilise the black population (Scott Ball 2018, 29).

Contrary to the short-story writing style in *Drum*, “Flowers” largely consists of descriptions by the narrator or by instances of free indirect style to convey Naram’s thoughts, rarely of dialogue – Naram, a sort of tragic hero, seldom interacts with other human beings. From the point of view of content, “Flowers” tackles coeval issues. While staging Naram’s tragedy, Dhlomo carefully depicts the relationship between the Indian and the African community of Johannesburg – the narrator mentions the Asiatic Land and Tenure Act (1946) and the Durban racial riots (1949) (418).<sup>20</sup> Some comments by the narrator, moreover, are racially biased: the Indians

waxed louder than the Africans, the sons and daughters of the soil, about their disabilities there, and pretended not to see their many blessings. (Dhlomo 1985, 417)

<sup>20</sup> The Asiatic Land and Tenure Act (1946) aimed to restrict Indian ownership property in white areas, while the Durban racial riots of 1949 were the result of increasing racial tensions between the African and Indian population in the city of Durban.

Dhlomo himself was ambivalent in his consideration of the Indian population, as emerges from his articles such as “How Long, O Lord!” (1949) and “Indians and Africans” (1953). In the former, written just after the riots, Dhlomo directly blames the Indians for the upheaval, stating that “many Indian business men use unfair and immoral business methods” (1949). It is legitimate to argue that Naram Samy is representative of this type of businessmen, and it is no coincidence that Dhlomo chose an Indian character as protagonist of his cautionary tale.

#### 4 “Aversion to Snakes” and “Village Blacksmith Tragicomedy” as Detective Stories

“Aversion to Snakes” similarly features an anti-hero as protagonist: Jack Joseph is described as an “insensitive, steel-nerved and reckless brute”, who steals jewellery and hits his mistress Lily, but who is also “pathologically” afraid of snakes (Dhlomo 1985, 471-2). During his break-ins, Jack also kills three women. When Lily calls the police to report the beating, Jack confesses the murders and the thefts to his startled mistress and to the police after he sees a dead snake. The presence of a female figure causing the main character’s downfall – the so-called ‘femme fatale’ – is, like the corrupt urban landscape, another convention of the hard-boiled genre, in which “[t]he representation of women as a threat to masculine mastery is one of the more lasting tropes” (Scott Ball 2018, 30). A similar pattern can be identified in Maimane’s series “Hot Diamonds”, where the detective Morena is defeated by a mysterious woman (Scott Ball 2018, 30-1). Both Dhlomo’s and *Drum*’s short stories often stage the characters’ disturbing encounter with the modern city through the representation of marital relationships and love affairs, in which women, though stereotypically represented in their domestic spheres, take centre stage.<sup>21</sup>

The highly intrusive narrator anticipates to readers the outcome of the events from the very first paragraph:

If Jack Joseph had not been pathologically afraid of snakes he would not have been found out and arrested [...]. Unfortunately for him his mistress, Lily, knew about this closely guarded secret of his. When the police arrested him for five murders and a number of thefts, no one was more surprised than they. (Dhlomo 1985, 471)

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the female figures in Dhlomo’s stories “The Barren Woman”, “He Forgave Her”, and “The Daughter”, see Sullam 2021. For a discussion of the representation of gender in *Drum*, see Driver 2002.

The opening of “Aversion to Snakes” thus completely reverses the conventions of the detective-story genre, in particular the so-called ‘whodunit’ formula, where readers participate with the detective in the “ratiocinative process” and the mystery is solved only at the end of the story (Naidu 2013, 132). In fact, Johannesburg’s Criminal Investigation Department – which features also in “Flowers” – is only fleetingly mentioned in the text, for the police is able to restore the social order by arresting Jack only thanks to his mistress and his eponymous aversion to snakes. The controlling role usually associated with the figure of the detective is actually taken on by the authoritative narrator of “Aversion to Snakes”, who repeatedly intervenes in the narrative to anticipate Jack’s fate and who tries to motivate Jack’s downfall and to unravel the story’s meaning for the reader: he comments on the “chain of factors” and on the “true and inevitable” causes (Dhlomo 1985, 471).

“Village Blacksmith Tragicomedy” follows the conventions of the detective-story genre more closely than “Aversion to Snakes”, yet at the same time “race disrupts genre” in this fiction (Guldimann 2019, 269): the narrative is actually a parody of the ‘whodunit’ detective stories. Indeed, irony, which is rarely found in Dhlomo’s fictional prose, governs the eponymous “tragicomedy”. The presentation of setting is indicative of the tone used by the narrator throughout the narrative:

In spite of its humble size, this country dorp, following the Great and Sacred Tradition of South Africa, has a segregated location for its black population. (Dhlomo 1985, 467)

In the village’s blacksmith shop, tellingly called “Vaderland” (‘fatherland’, 467), the dies used to cut threads suddenly start to disappear. The two white shop owners, “Messrs” Jan Nel and Piet Kerk (467), are humorously described by the narrator in their fruitless attempts to catch the thieves – the main suspects are the black workers. The two men humorously improvise detective skills: they “guarded all exits”, “watched the movements of the employees”, and “closely observed” them (467). Private investigators in detective stories, indeed, typically perform acts of surveillance; in the context of apartheid South Africa, this generic convention overlaps with the state’s own surveillance of black individuals (Guldimann 2019, 266-7). The trenchant irony of the narrator is apparent in the rhythmic repetition of the brief sentence “[s]till the dies disappeared” after he describes the two white owners’ vain efforts to frame the black workers (Dhlomo 1985, 467-68), as if the disappearance of dies were a serious crime – another parody of the detective story, in which a murder is usually committed.

Reluctantly, Nel and Kerk are obliged to call the police. It is interesting to quote the narratorial description of the police’s behaviour:

Of course, to camouflage the object of the raid, all the houses were raided and many Africans were arrested for possession of liquor, failure to produce their tax receipts and other minor offences.

During the raid the police, as usual, assaulted several Africans [who] were arrested and sent to Pretoria for trial as the dorp was too small to handle such a serious case. (468)

The narrative tone is factual but ironic, implicitly criticising the police's pointless harshness.<sup>22</sup> If read out of the context of the story, the quoted excerpt might easily be at home in a coeval journalistic piece on an actual event in South Africa: for its brevity and its clear indictment of discrimination, "Village Blacksmith Tragicomedy" is the one short story by Herbert Dhlomo that would have been most fitting for publication in a newspaper, resembling *Drum's* hybrid pieces of narrative reportage and investigative journalism. And indeed, when a black child solves the mystery (mice are the thieves), the narrator ends the story with the following comment:

But Kerk, Nel and the police wished that the mystery had not been solved by this small kaffir Sherlock Holmes. A journalist passing through the dorp heard the story and published it in a Pretoria newspaper which was circulated in the dorp. The story made the boy a hero and the others clowns. (470)

*Kaffir* is an insulting term for 'black' in South Africa. The sentence on the "kaffir Sherlock Holmes" reflects a widespread fear among a significant part of the white population in South Africa that educated blacks would replace them.<sup>23</sup> The reversal of the classical 'whodunit' formula, in which the restoration of the social order often confirms the status quo and which is inextricably linked to imperial power, is particularly significant (Matze, Mühleisen 2006, 4-5). Dhlomo thus re-works, parodying them, the conventions of the detective-story genre to protest against South Africa's socio-political condition and to promote "alternative notions of justice" (2006, 5).

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, the narrator never focuses on the figure of the detective in "Flowers" or "Aversion to Snakes", but he does emphasise that both cases "baffled" the Criminal Investigation Department (1985, 424, 471). Maimane similarly launches a critique of the police through the character of detective Morena in his stories (Guldemann 2019, 271).

<sup>23</sup> See also the reaction of a white official in Dhlomo's short story "Drought" when a black educated man dares answer him: he "muttered curses and something about spoilt school niggers whom he would teach a lesson" (Dhlomo 1985, 428).

## 5 Conclusion

The genre of detective stories, like science fiction, is characterised by a claim to knowledge that, in the context of black writing, has political implications, as Saul Dubow remarks when he talks about the “politics of knowledge” in South Africa (2006, 12). It is interesting to notice that both Dhlomo and the *Drum* writers, Maimane *in primis*, resorted to this subgenre of crime writing to make a political statement. In the introduction to her edited volume on popular fiction, *Readings in African Popular Fiction* (2002), Stephanie Newell foregrounds the didactic scope of African popular literature, whose function is not merely to entertain: she defines popular literature as an eminently urban phenomenon that never fails to “generate debate amongst readers on moral and behavioural issues” through the introduction of “ethical figures” such as the criminal and the barren woman (2002, 5).<sup>24</sup> The literary formulas of the Western (European and North American) popular genre of crime fiction are thus re-worked and adapted by both Dhlomo and the *Drum* writers to function in the local socio-political context of apartheid South Africa – even though the short stories by Dhlomo and Maimane are very different formally. In particular, the two writers’ representation of characters is innovative: Dhlomo’s non-African villains in “Flowers” and “Aversion to Snakes”, the African detective child in “Village Blacksmith Tragicomedy”, and Maimane’s black Americanised private investigator. These literary choices all contribute to discard the racist association of black people with criminals at a time when apartheid laws practically forced black South Africans into an outlaw status. The emphasis on science, moreover, is textual evidence of a claim to knowledge denied to Africans by the nationalist government – the Bantu Education Act was passed in 1953 to control black education and keep it separate. Dhlomo’s and Maimane’s detective stories thus exceed Western models, exposing the “inadequacy of centre-periphery models of cultural transmission”, and they take on experimental overtones (Newell 2002, 8). Ultimately, an analysis of Dhlomo’s short stories as popular fiction may help shed light on the fact that the *Drum* generation did not “pop out of a vacuum”, as Chapman has it (2001, 218), but rather came after the previous generation of New African intellectuals. A diachronic approach to the study of black English-language crime writing in South Africa may contribute to a discussion of this productive strand of popular fiction within the “longitudinal structure” of South African literary history (Masilela 2007, 198).

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, one of Dhlomo’s stories is titled “The Barren Woman”.

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