



# Ambiguous Female Figures in African Noir: Subversion or Submission?

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**Abstract.** African noir authors Angela Makholwa (*Red Ink*) and Kwei Quartey (*The Missing American*) focus on gender-based violence in the African locations of Johannesburg and Accra. They therefore inscribe deliberately ambiguous female detective figures that represent subversion of and submission to dominant social and generic conventions.

Many readers of crime fiction, when they hear the words *African* and *female detective* in the same sentence, will think of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, a rather tame series of novels by Scottish author Alexander McCall Smith set in Botswana, featuring the rather genteel, aptly named, Mma Precious Ramotswe. This article, however, examines the rise of a very different female figure in recent African noir texts. Authors such as Angela Makholwa and Kwei Quartey pen raw, gritty, and frankly quite bewildering novels about the most gruesome and endemic violence found in African capitals such as Johannesburg and Accra. Evincing both the noir tradition and the influence of African feminisms, these novels describe resolute and bold female detectives that are navigating African societies in transition. They attempt to counter gender-based violence and grapple with the tensions between “traditional” gender roles and modern, nonprescriptive ones. Innovatively, and sometimes discordantly, these texts utilize the noir genre to explore the precarious everyday reality of the majority of African women in neocolonial contexts across the continent, whilst at the same time inscribing feminist heroines in the form of a detective. As a result of this peril and flux, Makholwa’s and Quartey’s noir texts, feature ambiguous female figures that represent the African feminist principles of situated or context-specific action, self-empowerment before communal upliftment, and resistance to the fear and curtailment produced by gender-based violence.

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