CHAPTER THREE

Character and Narrative Discourse in Whispers

“The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place” (Things Fall Apart, 1958: 46).

In my introduction, I argued that Mutahi raises most issues in the column through the personal dramas of his characters. This chapter therefore examines the characters in Whispers with specific focus on how the characters are bound to discourse in the column. The chapter reads Mutahi’s characters and the narrative structure he adopts as allegorical and therefore, to use the words of Clifford (1974), as standing for things “bigger than themselves” (11). I begin with a brief discussion of characters in fiction after which I look at allegory as a narrative mode and narrative structure, examining the possibilities it provides the writer but also the constraints associated with its use. The chapter then offers a critical reading of the main characters Whispers, Thatcher and ‘The Investment’ and Whispers Jr, before discussing some of the column’s transient characters such as Fr. Camissasius, Teacher Damiano as well as Uncle Jethro, Appep and Aunt Kezia and their roles in the column. In the essay “The Tragic Conflict in Achebe’s Novels”, Abiola Irele (1979) argues that

[a] good novelist deals with not only situations but also individuals…
[a]nd it is precisely the cycle created by the responses of men to the pressure of events, their evolutions at significant levels of feeling and thought that makes the real world of the novel” (177).
Irele notes that the importance of Achebe’s novels derives not simply from his themes, “but also from his complete representation of men in action, in living reaction to their fate, as well as from his own perception that underlies his imaginative world and concerns upon its relevance and truth” (ibid.). This statement affirms the character as a carrier of discourse in fiction. Indeed, in a discussion of characters in the African novel, Ogude (1996) developing on the contributions of such theorists as Walter Allen, George Lukacs, Boris Tomachevsky and Rowland Barthes, points out that often, critics forget that “political and social concerns, which find their expression in themes are in fact best grasped by exploring the life and experience of characters in novels” (1). Ogude argues that there is a symbiotic relationship between the dominant narrative discourse and characterisation. These points significantly inform my reading of characters in Whispers. To begin with, I want agree with Tolson (1996) that for readers, it is easier to “visualise a person than an idea, a process or a structure… an interview can personify an abstract idea or clothe an idea in living flesh” (10). Yet it is also true that it is for different reasons that writers use characters in their work. For Mutahi, characters are privileged for two main reasons. It is important to read into Mbugua wa Mungai’s (2004) argument that Whispers’ principal appeal on the public imagination in Kenya was partly because of the column’s subversive streak. This argument clearly suggests that Mutahi’s work was constrained on ‘how’ he could ‘speak’. For this reason, Mutahi made significant use of allegory as his narrative mode and allegorical structure. The second point I want to make is that popular fiction is ‘popular’ precisely because it addresses its readerships’ popular concerns. This is best done through characters that readers can identify with, characters who represent their world and their concerns. It is such characters that tell their stories best. It is through these characters that Mutahi foregrounds Kenya(ns) as the column’s centre of interest and therefore as his major “character”. But why does Mutahi resort to allegorical characters?
The use of allegory in literary fiction has a long history. Clifford (1974) has noted that in the medieval and renaissance periods, allegory was a vehicle for explanation and provocation. In the latter part of the 20th Century, she argues, while allegory retains these characteristics, its uses have now been transformed to include the sceptical, the subversive and the soliplistic (116). Clifford especially notes that allegory is now popularly used for political critique. The use of allegory for political purposes is primarily because “obliqueness equals security”. Subterfuge, she argues, “becomes the only way of setting out certain values if these values are regarded as subversive by those in power” (50-51). While definitions of allegory vary, I want to define it, and use it after Clifford as an ‘extended metaphor’ subsuming many different genres and forms. Among these is the symbol—of objects or events or persons standing for something greater than themselves (11).

Clifford also explains that writers of allegory usually invent objects to suggest essentials of the concept they wish to explore but “these must be susceptible to the sort of description that tells us what it means, it should not suggest so many meanings that the dramatic continuum is shattered, for it is on this continuum that the overall sense of the allegory depends” (10). Clifford also observes that the strength but also the limitation of allegorical symbols is that they tend to be static, with all the ramifications of the meanings focused on the symbol. This statism is also manifest in the incompatible tendencies of many allegories. Since the form involves repetition, the repetition of structurally similar incidents produces the effect of immobility (11). Clifford argues that when allegory relies primarily on a single form of action, be it a battle or a debate, it has clarity often at the expense of subtlety. It will tend to be “dualistic, if not almost Manichean, in that Good has to be presented in terms comparable with Evil if it is to engage with it at all” (ibid.). This gives the impression of a closed system, yet a writer’s
concern, she notes, is with process, progression. She notes that allegory is therefore best utilised when a writer incorporates, for instance, the metaphor of the ‘journey’ with other devices such as the masque, debate or battle. She explains that in a journey,

[t]he traveller is an instrument whereby systems can be explored. Because he is an outsider, he often possesses a special kind of objectivity about the newly encountered system as a whole, while the sequential nature of his experiences provides for explaining its peculiarities. Everything encountered is new and strange and so the questions asked by the traveller are a natural pretext for explanation whether he is naïve or not (23).

I will shortly explore how Mutahi employs this narrative mode of the journey in *Whispers*. As noted in my Introduction, Mutahi’s adoption of the allegorical structure of the family was because the family is an easily recognisable template for reference across Kenya’s multiple cultures. Secondly, the family is also important because of its allegorical import, which provides a number of narrative possibilities for a writer. The family is a politically innocuous narrative space hence provides possibilities for exploitation as an allegorical space to engage with political issues especially of a sensitive nature. As noted earlier, in the column, there is a sense in which the writer collapses the domestic space with public space so that what is discussed within the family is read against the backdrop of national issues. McClintock (1995) provides a good discussion of the allegorical potential of the family by arguing that nations are “symbolically figured as domestic genealogies” (357) and that the “nation” is frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic spaces. Indeed, she notes that “nation” is derived from *natio* which means “to be born” (ibid.). The family in *Whispers* is used allegorically to mean the “nation”. Mutahi thus
engages with the everyday problems of his readers using the family as a template, but using the same template to simultaneously interrogate issues affecting the country at the national level. Within the family, or more appropriately ‘the domestic space’, the column discusses the familiar. It is essentially a ‘popular space’. We get a glimpse of the commonplace intrigues of the Kenyan family, the struggles to survive the challenges of living in the city; we see the anxieties resulting from urbanisation and its unsettling effects, the challenges of reconciling traditional ways of living with modern lifestyles. These are narrated through images of confusion, feuds, debates, and frustrations. The characters Mutahi employs codify the society’s fears and anxieties, but also their aspirations. The domestic arena is therefore portrayed as an arena for exploring wider socio-cultural and political issues in the country.

As noted earlier, the family in Whispers comprises the eponymous character Whispers, his wife Thatcher, their two children ‘The Investment’ and Whispers Jr as well as a several transient characters who include Teacher Damiano, Father Camissasius, Appepklonia, Rhoda, Aunt Kezia and Uncle Jethro. It is however through the character Whispers that much of the column’s concerns are discussed. Below, I examine the main characters Whispers, Thatcher, their children and some of the transient characters in the column.

Whispers, also referred to as ‘Son of the Soil’ is the main character in the column. He is a semi-urban Kenyan man trying to make a living in Nairobi. He is one of the millions of rural migrants in Nairobi who now call the city home. But he is not ‘weaned’ of his village upbringing yet. Using the allegorical form of a journey, we see this character move back and forth between the village and the city both physically and psychologically, what Mbugua wa Mungai (2004) has called the “the cultural and spatial crossings of the postcolonial Kenyan subject” (4). Through his journeys we are exposed to the existential dilemmas of this
subject. As noted by Clifford above, it is through him that Mutahi explores the unsettling effects of urbanisation. We experience his traumas and predicaments as he attempts to make sense of his two worlds, the village and its culture and the city with its own. Whispers is symbolic of Mutahi’s subject—Kenyans. The author’s use of the personal voice, of Whispers as the narrator is particularly telling of his role as a collective voice in the column. Even without the use of the collective pronoun ‘we’, one still get a sense of plurality in the narrator’s first person voice.

For Mutahi, *Whispers* is not a celebratory narrative; it is a lamentation of ‘things falling apart’. It is a narrative of dislocation, not only in the political sense, but also at the social level. The character is therefore, to put it rather loosely, the living theatre of the various dilemmas facing many Kenyans. Upon him, the effects of social and political changes are played out. This character plays multiple roles in the column, which does suggest as a consequence that he is to be read in a number of ways. I want to draw on three main readings, aware that various other readings may exist. At a social level, Whispers helps the writer discuss some of the effects of social transformation in Kenya. The writer particularly focuses on urbanisation’s impact on gender relations in Kenya as a site that demonstrates a society in flux. Mutahi also uses Whispers as an iconic figure that represents a demographic category—‘the people’. Whispers does not speak for ‘the people’ he speaks ‘with them’.

The description of Whispers as a ‘Son of the Soil’ is revealing in many respects. Indeed, it helps shape the readers’ expectations of this character. This title inscribes the character with certain characteristics. To be sure, one is reminded of Okonkwo, the ‘the roaring flame’, in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Whispers’ image as a ‘Son of the Soil’ provides a reservoir from which to draw the character’s characteristics and his roles in the column. The title encodes
various readings, one of which is the gesture towards a ‘restorative narrative’ being ‘recalled’ at a time of crisis. The soil evokes a nativist or a nationalistic discourse. The soil partly signals the authentic, it connotes a reverence for and a symbolic attachment to a tradition. The use of this image should be understood within the context of the prevailing political and social conditions of the 1980s through the 1990s in Kenya. I have noted in my introduction and elsewhere in this thesis that feelings of exclusion from the state by many Kenyans forced some to articulate their resistance in various ways, among these, looking into the past as a way of defiance but also to make meaning of the present. Socially, the effects of social transformation similarly forced a backward glance as a way of fending off the encroachment of a new rationalised culture.

At the social level Whispers mainly revolves around the effects of urbanisation, narrated as very unsettling. Among these effects are the anxieties resulting from the destabilisation of various ‘authentic’ identities. Whispers, for instance, represents a ‘maledom’ under threat in the face of an emerging rationalised culture. The character’s insistence that he is ‘Son of the Soil’ betrays some of his anxieties. A constant reaffirmation of an identity often betrays an anxiety over a perceived threat to that identity. Mutahi shows how the place of the man in modern society is being radically redefined in Kenya. In exploring this change, the writer forays into the tradition of patriarchy. The reference to the Whispers as the ‘Son of the Soil’ suggests a reading of the character as being rooted in a very mascularised gendered discourse. Whispers is portrayed as unapologetically bigoted. In much of this fiction, Mutahi deliberately dramatises patriarchy and Whispers as the quintessential patriarch. The intention, one would assume, is that this is a reflection on certain traditional norms and their place in society at a time when emphasis is increasingly being placed on individual liberties. The chauvinism is however more a representation of the state of things rather than a celebration of patriarchy. Indeed, Whispers often cuts the image of a failed
patriarch within the family, unable, for instance, to borrow from the violent pages of his grandfather, the ‘legendary’ Nyaituga, to ‘discipline’ his increasingly ‘independent’ wife, since although he is ‘Son of the Soil’, he also wants to pass for a ‘modern’ man. “If you wanted peace in the house”, Whispers often said, “you obeyed Nyaituga or you faced the mallet”. His wife Thatcher has become his ‘tormentor-in-chief’, emasculating his potency. He complains,

Nyaitugaism is about to become history. I am being told that I can sneeze if I want. I can even cough my lungs out if I wish but nobody will take notice in my house. I am being told that the philosophy of Nyaitugaism has become past tense nipende nisipende [Trans: whether I like it or not]. The army against Nyaitugaism is led by a woman who forgets that I delivered a whole beehive full of breathing bees to her clan so that she could become my Thatcher (Sunday Nation, April 27, 1997).

Whispers seeks refuge in bars and in alcohol to escape from his wife. Mutahi thus gives us a character who enacts the anxieties of a society in flux and who quite often finds himself a victim of this flux.

Whispers is deeply paranoid about social transformation precisely because this also means he loses his privileged place in the social hierarchy. The frustrations he undergoes are attributed in part to the effects of urbanisation. Quite revealing of these frustrations are his inexorable arguments with Thatcher. Their unending quarrels range from her disapproval of his weekend escapades—he is legendary for his drinking—his failure to adapt to the ‘ways of the city’ and live like a ‘modern’ man, one able, for instance, to occasionally buy roses for his wife, and his inability to provide for his family. The following examples may shed some light on these issues: In “Woes of liberalised airwaves: SoS voice of reason
drowned in a domestic war of words” (Sunday Nation, August 18, 1996), Whispers narrates his tense relationship with Thatcher who is up in arms about his drinking sprees. Thatcher disapproves of her husband’s habits and prays for his salvation. But while Thatcher sees her husband’s drinking habits as reckless and potentially destructive for the family, the ‘Son of the Soil’ recalls how his grandfather Nyaituga would drink himself senseless and have his five wives carry him home. Curiously, Whispers at the same time also regards his drinking “a constitutional right” and Thatcher as the transgressor. In “SOS massage mission ends in a showdown with Thatcher” (Sunday Nation, April 14, 1996), Whispers’ decision to visit a massage parlour turns tragic when Thatcher turns up and finds him with a scantily dressed woman. She accuses him of marital infidelity. In “Hotlines turn up the heat on the home front” (Sunday Nation, January 28, 1996), Whispers complains that because of cell phones, Thatcher is able to track his movements since her friends who suspect him of being a serial philanderer report on him whenever they see him with a woman. On his relationship with Thatcher, he constantly talks of having been given a last chance “… to keep order and be of good conduct otherwise I would face the wrath of the law that prohibits marital infidelity in my country of domicile where Thatchers have more say than men” (Sunday Nation, October 29, 2000). Giving yet another example of Thatcher’s new found independence, he says:

[t]he other day she refused to open the door. When I threatened to walk in with the door, she welcomed me to go ahead (Sunday Nation, April, 27, 1997).

Against the background of the Whispers’ family feuds, Mutahi discusses the many anxieties facing Kenyans in a changing society. Exposure to new lifestyles has seen the appropriation of new habits (visiting massage parlours), of social and political discourses of freedom (constitutional rights), and of new gadgets
(mobile phones). Sometimes these are seen as empowering, yet often times modernity is largely seen as an aberration and only a ‘return to source’ is sometimes seen as an attractive option.

A number of narratives in the column also seem to revolve around the effects of the money economy on the postcolonial subject. Mutahi works around what Lars Johansson (1990) calls the capitalist ethos of accumulation or what Ogude (1996) has termed the acquisitive spirit of capitalism. The character Whispers is constantly looking for money. Almost every week he is depicted as trying out a new scheme to make money. Although in gainful employment as a scribe, his income is barely adequate, indeed a common problem with Nairobi’s working class. The situation has forced him and his like to become what he calls men with ‘wardrobes of chameleons’. They have to ‘wear many faces’ to survive the city. His moneymaking schemes range from the bizarre to the impossible. But his life, like that of most Kenyans, is one where too little ambition is tragic. Shrinking economic opportunities has made life a constant struggle. Among his weird ventures, for instance, are his plans to start his own Church and cash in on the frustrations of those like him who seek refuge in the church. There are times when he smuggles illegal goods, other times he even plans to sell air! Only with such ridiculous ambition can one survive the vagaries of modern existence in postcolonial Kenya. In one example he says,

If by some miracle the Son of the Soil suddenly acquired the blood of the man from Milano, that is Father Camisassius and became Fr Whispers, no right thinking Kenyan would entrust the baptism of his child to him because that would entail several risks. One of them would of course be that a fellow whose hands have been made unsteady by Kanywaji (liquor) cannot be expected to aim water on the baby’s face right. That is why I think there is a very lucky baby somewhere in Kenya not because I am not
Fr Whispers but because I failed to become one when I tried to do so a week ago. I, the Son of the Soil, a former altar-boy, attempted to become Fr Adonikus Whis not because there is a shortage of priests but because there is a shortage of the Kenya shilling. You would have done what I did had you been in my position. My position was that the landlord and his thugs were threatening to auction me and my entire tribe consisting Thatcher, the Investment and Whispers Jr for failing to understand that he is not the Salvation Army or such other charitable organisation. In the same circumstances, Thatcher was beginning to question her wisdom in agreeing to be married to a man called Whispers the Son of the Soil instead of one who answers to the name Goldenberg. She was not keeping quiet about it but was broadcasting my failures to God every morning and night through prayers in a voice that left the neighbours knowing that in the midst was a kahusband who was unable to do many things including making sugar available in the house (Sunday Nation, August 8, 1993).

A number of narratives above are anchored around the relationship between Whispers and Thatcher, broadly hinting at several social, economic and political issues. In the excerpt, Whispers constantly reaffirms his identity, referring to himself repeatedly as ‘Son of the Soil’. It is a reaffirmation necessary in the face of an emerging rationalised culture that threatens to redefine the man, a culture where an attachment to the soil, to tradition, does not necessarily make him a man. We read that the ‘Son of the Soil’ is unable to pay his rent because of “scarcity of the Kenyan shilling”. He therefore fantasises that had he the “blood of the man from Milano”,¹ he would have tried to become a priest, if only to make ends meet. Yet a bad priest he would have become because Kanywaji has “destroyed his hands”. The character’s plight is a direct result of the country’s ailing economy. We see the effects of urban poverty which has pushed many

¹ Here Mutahi refers one of his characters, Father Camissasius.
Kenyans into bars and the fact that they can now “not aim water on a baby’s face right during baptism”, points to the severity of their state of penury. While a number of issues emerge from the example above and which can be discussed at length more critically, the excerpt in my opinion narrates quite strongly the anxieties that now mark the male-female relationship in Kenya as a result of social transformation. Because Whispers cannot pay his rent, the Son of the Soil has now become a kahusband rather than a husband. The prefix ka literally means small and is used here derogatively. It not only marks failure, it actually castrates maledom. Whispers thus becomes a ‘small husband’. An old gender type is in the process of being reworked on the basis of the new social order, one that focuses on what one has acquired. This excerpt also demonstrates the contradictions of a new culture that is seen to extol material individualism and accumulation, yet makes the society poorer.

Another significant reference made in this excerpt that further emphasises the writer’s representations on accumulation and material individualism in Kenya is his utilisation of a significant template of corruption in the country—Goldenberg. In the excerpt, Whispers complains about Thatcher rethinking her ‘wisdom’ in marrying him using a recognizable template, ‘Goldenberg’. The term ‘Goldenberg’ is used here in a very symbolic sense. The name refers to arguably the worst financial scandal yet in post-independence Kenya. Briefly, ‘Goldenberg’ was a financial scam that involved false gold exports and false compensation claims by a number of high ranking government official and businessmen that cost the Kenyan taxpayer billions of shillings. The name has over the years become what Jane Kitzinger (2000) calls a “media template”, defined as major social issues that have attracted intense media interest at the time and which continue to carry powerful associations. According to Kitzinger,

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2 The prefix is borrowed from the Kiswahili language although it is now commonly used in the emergent urban lingua in Kenya, Sheng’ to denote an inadequacy.
these events routinely highlight one perspective with great clarity and serve as rhetorical shorthand to writers. They are also seen to be instrumental in shaping narratives around particular social problems. In much of the column, Mutahi used this template as a symbol to denote the ethos of accumulation besides being a rhetorical shorthand for infamy.

Another template that recurs regularly is what I want to call the ‘Beijing narrative’ after the Women’s Beijing Conference held in China in 1995. This template is constantly used to demonstrate some of the anxieties that have arisen because of social transformation in Kenya. The Beijing Conference was a site of intense debate in East Africa from mid to late 1990s. The conference made visible, tensions around the changing male-female relationships in the region as it opened up debate on women’s rights. Before and after the conference, many a time the ‘Beijing power’ or ‘curse’ was invoked in normal conversations. In Uganda, over the same period, men referred to women’s issues as “this gender thing… katonda Wange (Luganda for my God!) (Mills and Ssewakiryanga, 2002). Beijing became, in the words of Mills and Ssewakiryanga (2002),”iconic metaphorical shorthand for gender issues” (393). Below is an example of how Mutahi engages with the ‘gender tensions’ through this narrative.

When I married Thatcher, her clan assured me that the only geography she knew and she intended to continue knowing was that of the kitchen. This is to say that in exchange for the goats I gave her clan, I was given a guarantee that she would know only those matter involving moving to and from the kitchen and managing the affairs of the kitchen... Now I know that her clan conned me about her knowledge of geography. The same woman ended up learning the geography of my wallet and has been discovering its hidden corners. She has also learnt the geography of my head so that when I tell a lie, she no longer nods in agreement like a lizard
in the sun but instead gives me a look to say that there is a difference between her and her daughter the Investment. Thatcher is now talking even more geography. She is talking about a town called Beijing as if it is the same village on the Slopes of Mount Kenya where she was born and brought up. It is all the work of this ‘Sect of many waters’ to which she belongs. The sect members normally talk about a city called Heaven whose mayor is Angel Gabriel, but of late, Beijing has been on their lips. They have heard that thousands of skirts will meet there to talk about big things about how to manage men, and so they imagine that after a city called Heaven, Beijing comes next (Sunday Nation, August 6, 1995).

This article was written against the background of the euphoria that preceded the Beijing women’s conference. Mutahi shows how Kenyan men were not happy with the changing times that this conference signalled. Like their counterparts in Uganda, there was an attempt to “de-gender gender issues or inflect them in a way that did not directly challenge dominant masculinities” (Mills and Ssewakiryanga, 2002: 393). Women’s rights are thus deliberately portrayed as unreasonable, quixotic even utopian, hence unachievable. The article reveals tensions that attend the negotiation between notions of African modernity and its attendant discourses such as feminism on the one hand and African traditional life, a term I use in a very general sense here, on the other hand. We see the ‘Son of the Soil’s’ unease about a ‘liberated’ Thatcher. Women’s liberation is considered by the men as potentially threatening to their place in the now highly contested social hierarchy.

In sum, Mutahi’s portrayal of Whispers is stereotypical and melodramatic. But this only serves to intensify the experiences that are ordinary yet whose underlying meanings are very profound. Mutahi creates a shared universe between his readers and this character. Through this character, one is able to live
but also to interrogate the everyday problems and anxieties of the Kenyan subject; his travails in pursuit of a better life, his confusion when confronted with social transformation and his reaction to ensure he is not overawed by these changes. Mutahi shows how this subject has a way of appropriating what transformation has to offer. Times are uncertain, but he has learnt to survive these times. This however does not mean he endorses the modernisation process in toto. Mutahi’s backward glance hints at a liking for that past, a point possibly shared by a number of his readers but perhaps only because they are confronted with a present they cannot fully grasp and a future they cannot predict.

While the character Whispers is an iconic metaphor for reading the man and on occasion the postcolonial Kenyan subject, Thatcher also broadly helps the writer discuss social transformation especially questions on gender relations and individual liberties in postcolonial Kenya. I have already noted in the previous chapters that Thatcher derives her name from the former British Premier Margaret Thatcher. I have also noted that the former PM was a particularly visible figure in the Kenyan popular press and was especially known for her aggressive political style. Thatcher thus became a symbol of the new woman in Kenya. Her fictional character in Whispers subverts certain traditional norms particularly the subordinate role of the woman in society. Thatcher subverts the negative inscriptions on the female gender in Kenya. It is instructive to note that the woman has been stereotyped in several African popular texts, most often as “the good time girl”. Although notable exceptions exist3, the dominant narrative has been to depict female characters as social pests always out to gain from men.

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3 Many critics have categorised female characters in Kenyan fiction into three types namely: ‘Nyapol’s daughters, the prostitute figure and the political figure. Kurtz (1998) calls Grace Ogot’s female characters ‘Nyapol’s daughters’. These women are given agency in fiction. The ‘Prostitute figure’ on the other hand is used by a host of critics to define the ‘errant’ female character while the ‘Political figure’ is so named because of her critical political awareness. Such character types can be found in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s work, for instance, Wanja in Petals of Blood.
and destroy them in the process. In Kenyan fiction, again with a few notable exceptions, Eleanor Wachtel writes,

The modern woman was continuously associated with the evils of the city such as drinking, violence, temptation and prostitution. She is depicted as a contemptuous parasite against the cherished background of the ideal traditional mother image. This easily leads to the stereotyped antithesis of mother whore… (cited in Ogude, 1996: 173).

In Whispers, these roles are reversed. It is the woman both as wife and mother who plays the role of redeemer of the man. Mutahi intimated that one of Thatcher’s major roles in the column is to “prop up wayward Whispers”. It is Thatcher therefore who steers Whispers to responsibility. She rejects his drinking habits, his supposed philandering ways, and his ideas about the place of the woman in the family. Thatcher asserts her authority in the face of overwhelming societal expectations, most of which are designed to keep her subordinate to her husband. She is able to stand up to Whispers in their marriage. Indeed, Whispers admits that Thatcher does not “simply nod like a lizard in the sun” anymore. She spells out her aversion to certain traditional norms openly even when Whispers pretends to only partly acknowledge her power.

But Thatcher’s insistence on her independence also transforms her into a matriarch. She becomes the centre of power in the family, almost a female version of her patriarchal husband. Whispers lives in constant fear of his wife, who fittingly takes the title of “Iron Lady”. Mutahi uses this character to elicit debate on questions around individual liberties and gender relations. How do we reconcile these liberties with traditional norms so that they exist together harmoniously? How do we not replace patriarchy with matriarchy? I also want

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4 Personal interview with Mutahi, February, 2003
to note that although Mutahi attempts to give his female character agency, he privileges discourse to character development. Unlike writers such as Grace Ogot who privilege the female voice to give it moral authority, Mutahi privileges character but denies her the voice. Half the time, Thatcher speaks through the voice of Whispers. Although in both Ogot’s work and in Whispers we see patriarchal ideology/authority exposed as sexist bias and a space created for the female subject, Mutahi’s narrative mode of allegory weakens his female character. Thatcher enters the narrative already ‘constructed’ as a matriarch, limiting the writer’s ability to develop the character and explore other possible identities.

Whispers’ children, ‘The Investment’ and Whispers Jr, stand as a negation of their father. The two are symbolic receptacles of the youth. Whispers complains that he and Thatcher “brought forth two problems in the form of Whispers Jr and The Investment” (Sunday Nation, April, 27, 1997). He complains that Whispers Jr “has been at war with his Creator and wishes to correct the mistakes of nature. That is why he sees it wise to wear certain items on his nose. Those items are otherwise used to fasten nappies and they are called safety pins” (Sunday Nation, June 22, 1997). Their dressing, language, mannerisms and other interests are attributes of the modern day rebellious teenager. Dress and décor, Hebridge (1979) argues in a study of the American punk subculture, are key to expressions of latent anxieties and desires of the youth. It is partly through the dress sense of ‘The Investment’ and Whispers Jr that Mutahi explores the modern Kenyan youth culture. But let us first explore the relevance of the name of the character ‘The Investment’.

I noted in the previous chapter that ‘The Investment’s’ name gestures towards certain narratives which Mutahi explores in the column. She introduces the idea of the daughter as a commodity. ‘The Investment’ therefore personifies certain
socio-cultural realities, particularly the fact that young girls in Kenya are seen as commodities and therefore as ‘investments’ by their fathers. But the name also hints at a very modernist notion—investment. There is a sense in which tradition is shown to reside in modernity where it is merely given a new face. Mutahi shows how certain traditional norms are ‘abused’ by modernity. In a revealing article, “Whispers’ encounter with mother-in-law”, Whispers complains about an emerging group of mothers-in-law whom he describes as “hawkers in search of the highest bidders for their daughters”. He says:

[w]hen I started to imagine that I was warrior enough to get a Thatcher of my own, I was told to fear three things if I wanted to get married. These were lightning, hot porridge and my mother-in-law. I was told that my mother-in-law was tougher than lightning and hot porridge combined and so I was supposed to fear her more than the two dangers. I was told that she was tough mainly because were it not for her wisdom and gallant efforts, the woman I call my wife would not have come to this world. Now I think that kind of mother-in-law is an endangered species like the white Rhino and if it is not saved soon enough, she will become extinct. This is because for one, she is no longer just the mother of a marriageable girl. The modern mother-in-law is first and foremost a hawker who looks for the highest bidder for her daughter. She is the type of hawker who will go on spying missions to the home of the eligible bachelor to make sure that there are more stone houses than grass thatched ones… (Sunday Nation, September 18, 1994).

In the excerpt, the writer demonstrates how practices such as marriage have been transformed. The example demonstrates how bride price has been commercialised. Trapped in the ethos of accumulation, mothers-in-law now
‘hawk’ their own daughters. They look for rich potential husbands for their daughters.

The investment however rejects her treatment as a trophy for sale and seeks to establish her independence. Mutahi particularly uses the ‘Beijing narrative’ to show the youth’s rejection of their parents’ claim on their futures. In the evocative article “Why I now hate Beijing” (Sunday Nation, August 6, 1995), Whispers complains about the “tragedy” that has befallen his family because ‘The Investment’ seems disinterested in getting married. Whispers complains thus:

I am not impressed by her imagination and would like to know from the women going to Bei Chini⁵ why this same girl has been behaving as if she has something against her father. She seems to be suggesting that my chances of getting dowry worth a Pajero (a four-wheel drive car) from a fellow lucky enough to marry a girl who imagines being a rival of Eden are Zero. If you were a father, you would get the message when your daughter starts reading certain things in a way that she wants you to know what her eyes are encountering. The Investment has been doing exactly that. Last week she was reading a book called How to Manage as a Single Mother. Before that she was reading another book called When there is no Husband. I have seen her read another called Managing Without Him. In her bag is yet another one called Single but Able (Sunday Nation, August 6, 1995).

Whispers is deeply concerned about the fact that he will be unable to cash in on his ‘investment’. He mourns how new society denies him returns to his “one thousand”. The writer then subtly introduces questions around feminism. Note

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⁵ This is a Kiswahili phrase which literally means ‘price down’. It is a fascinating corruption of the word Beijing. In the excerpt, it is used to refer to the ‘devaluation’ of the daughter in monetary terms because of the Beijing Conference.
the book titles that ‘The Investment’ is allegedly reading. These titles show how
the idea of the daughter as an “investment” is being challenged by a range of
feminist discourses. It is these discourses that ‘The Investment’ mobilises to lay
claim on her right to define her future. In the same article, the writer also
broaches a discussion on single motherhood. In a hilarious yet biting story,
Whispers says:

[a] girl cannot be more unkind to her father. Denying him dowry big
enough to buy a Pajero is bad enough but planning to bring forth little ones
when she has no husband is sentencing her old man to death. …
[w]henever I go to wet my throat… tongues will wag… there goes the Son
of the Soil. He calls himself a man and yet he cannot get even a sweet
potato in exchange for his daughter. There goes Son of Appep who claims
he is a total man and his daughter has been breeding in his homestead as if
there are no more husbands to take care of children (Sunday Nation, August
6, 1995).

Mutahi demonstrates the latent anxieties that the daughter’s newly found
freedom and assertive individuality means. He introduces for discussion the
models of and for “womanbeing”. While on the one hand he uses ‘The
Investment’ to satirise and implicitly condemn the ‘commoditisation’ of the girl
child in Kenya, he also asks questions about single motherhood. The dilemma
facing Kenyans now is how to reconcile the need for personal liberation with the
demands of certain institutions considered key to traditional society, institutions
such as the family.

As noted earlier, Mutahi also addresses some of the latent anxieties of the youth
through ‘The Investment’s and Whispers Jr’s way of dressing. Whispers
incessantly complains about his children’s dress sense. As Mbugua wa Mungai
(2004) notes, their dressing is a source of anxiety for the parents because they threaten the ‘accepted’. The Investment’s dressing particularly reveals these anxieties, which sometimes take the form of a generational confrontation. In one example, Whispers complains:

I would like to know why she (the Investment) is trying to outdo that woman of the Garden of Eden called Eve in matters of going about naked in broad daylight. If what she is wearing in the name of a skirt is not equal to being naked then I have no idea about nakedness. She has this idea that whoever created the skirt had no business creating a piece of cloth that stretches from the waist to the knees alright but which should be split at the back. She walked with those splits for some time and was still not satisfied. She ended up making that skirt a matter of ribbons which she now wears the same way Eve used to wear a leaf in the Garden of Eden (Sunday Nation, May 29, 1994).

The allusion to the Bible here gives us an idea of how Whispers’ generation views the emergent youth culture. The sexual allusion is only thinly veiled and serves to show a section of society, especially the old, rejecting this modern youth culture. For the youth however, it is similarly a rejection of a culture of ‘parental management’. Being scantily dressed in no way suggests promiscuity. Whispers describes his children as captives of the American youth culture. He cannot disguise his contempt at the ‘hommies’ and ‘yoyos’ and describes them thus:

[a] Yoyo is a character who was fed on a liquid called Nyayo milk. It means he learned what a handkerchief is for just the other day…. The yoyo walks as if he has springs under his feet and leans on the side as he walks like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He wears trousers as if he is scared
of them so he does know where his waist is. That being the case, his trousers hang in between the waist and the knees. His shoes are the size of beer crates and he thinks that a pin on the nose is a very good idea. He is often wearing a string vest because he imagines that he is the younger brother of Kobe Bryant (*Sunday Nation*, July 23, 2000).

But these examples must be understood as metaphors that codify a whole range of issues that emphasise some of the effects of social transformation in Kenya. The youth have lost out to the allure of the American youth culture whose basis many do not understand.

There are a number of transient characters in *Whispers*, those introduced in the column only when the writer discusses specific issues. The most notable of these characters include Father Camisassius, a Catholic priest, Damiano Wambugu, a school teacher, Appepklonia, Aunt Kezia and Uncle Jethro. These characters provide the writer a natural access to the past. There is a tendency in *Whispers* to search for answers to present queries in the past. Introduced mostly through flashbacks, Mutahi uses these characters to draw on allegorical stories, on communal tales, and sayings to comment on the present. This communal corpus of reference provides Mutahi with a solid base from which to view and comment on the present world. One is easily reminded of Lindfors (1991) argument that the past often provides writers with a grammar of values. Even then, it is instructive that Mutahi does not claim the past has monopoly over virtue or wisdom. The allegorical stories and communal lore drawn upon carry virtues which community esteems but also the vices which it condemns.

Fr. Camisassius and Teacher Damiano are particularly important transient characters in *Whispers*. As I discuss in a Chapter five, Mutahi is interested in unpacking the ‘traditional’ centres of authority in Kenya, such as the church and
the school, which he does through these two characters. Mbugua wa Mungai (2004) makes a similar argument noting that through an engagement with Kenya’s ‘missionary past’, Mutahi is able to examine the “dual tyranny” of the church and the school as centres of authority and how this “tyranny” constitutes a formative phase in the process by which citizens are variously and collectively socialised in Kenya. Mbugua notes that having been taught by both the priest and the teacher to never (seriously) question the nature of things, one becomes malleable to manipulation. He suggests that one of Mutahi’s aims is to show the need for Kenyans to be more sceptical, especially towards institutions of power, in order to respond more effectively to their tyranny.

Narratives around Fr Camissasius and Damiano largely revolve around Christian religious experience in Kenya. As noted earlier, Fr Camissasius is a Catholic priest of the Consolata Order. But the character displays the tyranny of the church and is a common subject of the writer’s satirical barbs. He displays instances of arrogant paternalism, racism and the inability to accept the legitimacy of other worldviews apart from his own. Through this character, readers are exposed to the tyranny of this eccentric priest and his lackeys such as Damiano. However, this is a general indictment of authority. But there are also times when Fr Camissasius becomes a vehicle for discussing society’s moral degeneration. For instance, in the article, “Bye Kenya, S.A needs Whis too”, Mutahi engages with issues of morality in the modern Catholic Church. He writes:

[n]ow very loud whispers are saying that the men in cassocks are very busy doing the opposite of what they profess. The whispers from the Vatican are saying that the men in dresses, sorry, the men in cassocks, are doing things that should make them end up in Kamiti Prison. They are waiting for nuns in dark corners and then applying tactics that are seen in the World
Wrestling Federation matches. I don’t need to tell what follows after that except that some of the nuns have found themselves ready for the maternity hospital. Since no nun has ever been accepted in a maternity hospital except as a nurse, they have been forced to put little ones in dustbins. If you don’t believe me, ask Ndingi son of Nzeki, the one who says that “kondoms” are manufactured in the devil’s workshop. It was all on Pope FM and in the newspapers last week.

Father Camisassius must have threatened to rise from the grave to murder a few men in cassocks when he heard the news. This is because he could have forgiven you for committing murder but not for breaking the commandment that says you should not eye your neighbour’s wife in a manner to suggest that she ought to have married you instead of being the Thatchers of the fool next door… As I have whispered to you before, Fr Camisassius thought that when he saw a skirt-wearer, he saw total sin. That’s why if he met a woman when he was alone, he either shut his eyes or changed direction. Now I hear that when the eyes of those who wear cassocks see a skirt-wearer, they start blinking and their eyes pop out. I hear the same eyes say things like this: Beautiful one, although I wear a dress in the name of a cassock, I am actually not a woman. I’d be happy to prove this to you (Sunday Nation, April 1, 2001).

The above excerpt was written against the background of accusations of sexual impropriety within the ranks of the Catholic Church in many parts of the world including Kenya. The author draws his lessons from the days of Fr Camisassius’ evangelisation in the ‘Slopes’. The ‘good’ Father believed in the ‘integrity’ of priesthood so much so that to avoid temptation, he “shut his eyes whenever he saw a skirt-wearer”. In much of the column, we also read that Fr. Camisassius “feared and hated sin”. Mutahi dramatises this past as a commentary on the
present. Although portrayed as eccentric, Mutahi uses the Father, for instance, as portrayed above, to impart moral lessons. In the excerpt above, the writer is concerned with certain banalities of modern life—abortion, marital infidelity, and promiscuity and the general moral degeneration of modern Kenya. The severity of these problems is underlined by the fact that the church, which ought to be society’s moral guide is now implicated in this moral decay.

The other characters Appepklonia, Aunt Kezia and Uncle Jethro represent the surviving voices of a generation effectively being replaced, and of traditions under siege. They are the writer’s link to the traditional past. Their communal world is contrasted with the new world where individuality now defines social life. Indeed, Mutahi’s emphasis on the nuclear family is indicative of the changing definition of the African traditional family. These three characters are part of his main character’s extended family but are often portrayed as encroaching into the Whisper’s family’s privacy. Whenever Appep or Uncle Jethro visit the Whispers’ household, the visit is no longer a source of happiness and especially so if it lasts more than a couple of days. Mutahi shows how the extended family in Kenya has collapsed and with it the disintegration of certain values. I want to point out that this collapse of the extended family should be seen as yet another example of the changes that have resulted from the rapid social transformation that Kenyans now have to come to terms with. But it could also at the same time hint at the general collapse of certain ‘fibres’ that once held the Kenyan society together.

Although the use of the allegory provides Mutahi with several narrative possibilities, the constraints associated with this narrative are evident in the work. For instance, Mutahi’s characters are static and never seem to change. Mutahi’s characters can never be different. They enter the narrative as particular character types, linear, typological and unchanging. For nearly a decade, these
characters remained the same. It is true that these characters help shape the readers expectations, but at the same time, they provide no form of regeneration because one already knows what to expect when they encounter a particular character. I also mentioned the fact that a character such as Whispers can be given many readings. This character is loaded with far too many roles and responsibilities. Apart from complicating the narrative structure, this can also be a source of confusion to readers.

I also want to argue that Mutahi’s discourses appear to be constrained by the narrative framework of the family. One may want to question both the representation as well as the validity of this family. It is important to note Croteau and Hoynes’ (1997) observation that “traditional expectations that a family include two parents, that the parents be married, that they be heterosexual, that a woman work only in the home, and so forth have changed dramatically’ (16). Indeed, single parent families, blended families, to name but a few, have supplemented the traditional family. The family structure and the pattern of behaviour associated with families have changed considerably. The use of allegory in Whispers therefore provides the writer with a number of narrative possibilities, but it also constrains his work in very significant ways.

Conclusion
This chapter has attempted a discussion of character and discourse in Whispers. I have argued that it is through personal dramas of characters that Mutahi explores his narrative discourse. Mutahi deploys an allegorical narrative mode in his work, using the family as his allegorical structure and using characters as allegorical types. For easy reference, familiarity and the narrative possibilities it avails a writer, Mutahi structures his work around a Kenyan family and characters that readers can easily identify with. In other words, the world he creates is one that is shared by his readers. The characters he deploys are not just
people his readers know, the readers are in fact these characters. I have also
demonstrated the limitations of this narrative structure and narrative mode
especially their unchanging and typological nature. In terms of the ‘subjects’
under discussion, this column engages with how society is negotiating an elusive
consensus between traditional norms of living and certain new lifestyles
associated with ‘modernity’. As noted in the latter parts of this discussion,
consensus seems to mean different things to different people involved hence the
apparent conflict. There are times when recourse to the traditional past is found
appealing, while at other times it is found to be quaint hence the pervasive sense
of ambivalence and contradictions that some of the characters seem to display.