

https://dspace.org/

Stirring whispers: fictionalising the 'popular' in the Kenyan Newspaper

Ogola, George Otieno

2006-03-22
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/262

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

CHAPTER ONE

Background to the Study and a Theorisation of the 'Popular'

Until his death in July 2003, (Paul) Wahome Mutahi was among the most popular creative writers in Kenya. He had published several novels and novellas, was an acclaimed playwright, journalist and a thespian of notable following. Mutahi was however best known for his satirical newspaper column *Whispers*, arguably his most influential work. For close to two decades since 1983, *Whispers* was a regular feature in the Kenyan newspapers, a feat only surpassed by legendary Edward Rodwell's *Coast Causerie,* which ran for nearly half a century. In an obituary published soon after Mutahi's death, a writer in the *Sunday Nation*, one of the two newspapers which published Mutahi's work condoled thus: "[w]ith the exception of God and disability, Wahome Mutahi could laugh at anything in life. He laughed at society, he laughed at the Government and he laughed at his family—but he laughed at himself the hardest" (*Daily Nation*, July 23, 2003). Yet as Joyce Hertzler (1970) is wont to say, what a people laugh at, at any given time can "reveal what they are interested in, concerned about, aroused by, disgusted and preoccupied with" (58-9). In Mutahi's work, laughter was employed in the Bakhtinian (1981) sense, it allowed authority, as well as the commonplace, to be "drawn into a zone of crude contact", "fingered familiarly, turned upside down, inside out and peered at from above and below… dismembered" (23). In sum, *Whispers* was a public space where Kenya's postcolonial existence, in its many faces, was constantly interrogated. In many ways, the column defined the 'Kenya(n) becoming', exploring his hopes and fears, his dreams and failures, his existential dilemmas as he grappled with the vagaries of African modernity and the ruthlessness of the postcolonial political order. But above all else, Mutahi highlighted the realm of the 'popular' as being

capable of engaging with the complex contradictions and ambiguities of postcolonial Kenya.

This thesis examines *Whispers,* to case study the print media as one of the cultural zones/sites within which popular fiction is produced. To this end, the thesis explores a number of issues: first, it maps out the broader historical, intellectual and literary traditions within which popular fiction in Kenya is produced. The intention, in part, is to establish the history and the intellectual and literary traditions that have attended the emergence and growth of popular fiction in Kenya. Secondly, the thesis examines how popular arts, as Barber (1987) points out, besides reflecting social mores "intervene in the life of society by organising and interpreting experiences which have previously been subjected only to partial reflection" (6). I am interested in those experiences within this 'text' that makes it 'popular', as such I examine the column both as a 'popular' literary text but also as a 'media' text. I discuss among other things how, for instance, *Whispers* interrogates his readers' 'popular' concerns but at the same time, what makes his engagement so 'popular'. The thesis is interested in how the column calls into existence what I refer to as a 'community of readers'; how Mutahi constitutes a composite public by drawing on a pool of popular cultural resources to examine a range of social and political issues in postcolonial Kenya. Popular culture, I argue after Street (1997), creates an audience, "a people who will laugh at their jokes, understand their fears and share their hopes…" (60). On the basis of these popular cultural forms, these people are able to create, as Liz Gunner (1994) points out, an identity for themselves in a way that they were not previously able to do and upon these identities, they may then act. I therefore argue that *Whispers* targets and serves certain "imagined communities", to use Benedict Anderson's (1983) common phrase, entities which although heterogeneous, are imagined as homogeneously accessible. This is done for purposes that when read against the context of the column's production hints at

the writer's attempts at understanding how the Kenyan subject creates what Fabian (1998) calls "moments of freedom" (21) within Kenya's social and political imaginary. Quite overtly, the title of the column *Whispers* is revealing of a certain sense of repression and gestures towards an attempt to 'own' a particular 'space of freedom'.

Situating the text *Whispers* within the context of its production, I also look at how the column dramatises the limits of its genre; how popular fiction and the newspaper provide possibilities for experimentation with a range of narrative strategies as well as thematic options. Yet these are strategies not far removed from society; they are an exploration of traditions perfected by the subaltern to create and own certain social and political spaces. The thesis thus attempts a study of Mutahi's narrative strategies in *Whispers* while simultaneously interrogating the reasons that necessitate their deployment, and quite importantly, to what end. An attempt is also made to evaluate the significance and space that *Whispers* and popular fiction in the popular press occupies within Kenya's literary culture. This thesis intends not only to contribute to scholarship on popular literature in Kenya by recognizing the newspaper as an important cultural zone where popular fiction is produced, it is also interested in foregrounding this genre within the newspaper as an alternative site for reading postcolonial Kenya.

After decades on the margins of literary studies, popular literature has in recent times become a serious area of academic study in Africa. In East Africa, Kurtz (1998) has noted that popular literature is being taken seriously in part because of perceptions that it offers insights into what Imbuga (1993) describes as "the reality experienced by a majority of East Africans presenting a true mirror of the hidden reality of the region's social experiences" (127). Although there have been critical work on popular culture in East Africa, Ogude and Nyairo (2004) point

out that many of these studies have been of a historical nature with a few exceptions mainly covering performance art (Outa, 2003; Ruganda, 1992; Bjorkman, 1989; Ranger, 1975). There is still a paucity of critical work on popular fiction within the popular press in the region. This is despite the genre's versatility, resilience and 'popularity' in the region since the 1970s. A few notable exceptions however include Bodil Folke Frederiksen's study of *Joe*, a popular magazine in Kenya in the 1970s (Frederiksen, 1991) and Richard Lepine's (1988) study of Kiswahili newspaper fiction in Kenya. Fiction columns have regularly featured in Kenyan newspapers for over three decades now and their resilience over the years if nothing else clearly points to their popularity with readers in the region. These fiction columns seem to offer a number of possibilities for newspapers. With a largely muted press, it is these columns that have kept the newspaper porous. Through popular fiction, the Kenyan newspapers, for instance, have been able to provide an alternative space for stories that do not make it to the conventional sub-genres of the newspaper such as 'news' or 'editorials'. The fiction columns manage to tell stories traditionally marginalized by the mainstream press. They discuss issues that are often 'spiked' by the mainstream press mainly because of institutional and political reasons. In an interesting study of a popular cartoon strip in South Africa, *Madam and Eve*, Sarah Britten (1988) argues that it is in the "parallel universe of fiction, we can laugh at some of these issues that easily provoke anger, angst and frustrations in the real world…" (30). Popular genres can, in the words of Barber (1987), "collaborate with, adapt to or evade the intermittent demands of the state while retaining the capacity to formulate devastating criticism" (5).

The agency and space that *Whispers* has enjoyed over the last two decades points to its place as a significant popular text in Kenya. From a largely descriptive single column in 1983, *Whispers* grew into a full-page weekly article in two of the region's most widely read newspapers, *The East African Standard* and *The Sunday*

Nation. By 2003, Mutahi was also writing two other fiction columns modelled on *Whispers* namely, "These Crazy Kenyans" and "Lugambo" (Luganda for Whispers) in a Ugandan newspaper, *The Monitor*.

Popular texts have been ignored in Kenya for a number of reasons. Traditionally, criticism of Kenyan literature and more particularly of the novel has generally been located within the debates around the idea of the 'popular', largely defined by the multinational publishers and university critics, themselves often a part of a canonised group of writers. Jane Bryce argues that in Kenya, the process whereby texts are classified as 'elite' or 'popular' for a long time has been based on the evaluative procedures of the multinational publishers such as Heinemann, Longman and Macmillan (cited in Barber 1997: 121). These publishing firms have privileged the already established canon, that is also the critic of Kenyan literature. Not surprisingly, most popular writers in Kenya have therefore been published by less known and much smaller publishing firms or imprints of the well established publishers such as Macmillan's *Pacesetters*, Heinemann's *Spear Books* and *Heartbeats* and Longman's *Drumbeats*.

But the stature of popular culture and literature in Kenya is also to be seen against the main discourse traditions that have influenced African literary criticism in general, what Kasongo (1992) describes as the 'Africanist discourse' and the 'African discourse' (35-6), but which in more familiar terms are often referred to as the Marxist/Socialist and the Realist traditions. The former is seen to judge the African novel on epistemological values based on Western literature while the latter seeks a radical adjustment to these values. In sum, the debate as Ogude and Nyairo (2004) point out has been "underpinned by a highly prescriptive tendency… guided by a narrowly conceived idea of what constitutes utilitarian literature, an understanding which was often constructed around the moral war-heads of good and bad literature" (2). Thus variants of the 'African

discourse' have tended to define the 'well-made African novel' on 'literary-political terms'. In Kenya, therefore, the political novel of the late 1960s and 1970s and later the 1980s is easily seen as the canon embraced by both publisher and critic.

Even as the Kenyan novel gravitated towards a more popular vein the 1970s through the 1980s, this trend was furiously criticized by a number of university-based critics. Almost synonymous with this group is Chris Wanjala, one of the most vocal exponents of "committed" literature in Kenya. Wanjala complained about the Kenyan popular writer's infatuation with the romance genre. He criticised writers such as David Maillu and Charles Mangua for what he saw as their fixation with the banal. According to Wanjala, popular literature imitated the scabrous romance genre from the West, a genre meant for the entertainment mass market. Accordingly, it lacked the imaginative nuance required of the committed artist. Elizabeth Knight was another vocal critic of the Kenyan popular writers also accusing them of imitating Western potboilers. While not dismissing writers such as Charles Mangua as inconsequential, Berth Lindfors (1991) has similarly complained that Kenyan writers of popular fiction have "deflated the literary value" of Kenyan literature. Lindfors talks about the

> deflation of literary value that is apparent in the gradual progression from Ngugi's serious historical fiction of the early Sixties to p' Bitek's amusing satirical poetry of the late Sixties to Mangua's frivolous proletarian potboilers of the early Seventies is now being duplicated in every genre as imitators with far less talent flood the market with insipid drivel (51).

Lindfors wonders whether "East Africa's best literary impulses will be drowned in a swamp of pulp" (ibid.). Lindfors' unease with popular literature in Kenya is to be found in his criticism of both Mangua and Maillu whom he accuses of

having vulgarized Okot p'Bitek's serious humour. The idea of 'committed literature', which increasingly gravitates towards the 'Africanist discourse' yet clothed as 'African discourse' has been a powerful criteria in the evaluation of Kenyan literature, although in my opinion a little disingenuous. The approach tends to conveniently ignore certain historical and social specificities as legitimate influences in the production of popular cultural forms in Africa. Scholars such as Barber (1997) and Newell (2000) have since demonstrated that popular texts which might be regarded trivial are in fact influenced by social realism as a major functional and fictional technique. As such, for these texts, the realist criteria should provide a useful tool for evaluation. Hence, serious socio-economic and political issues are therefore addressed as much in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* as in Charles Mangua's *Son of a Woman*. The difference is more a question of form than kind. Newell has particularly revealed the conceptual problematic inherent in the master narrative that has defined the well-made African novel. Newell (2002) argues that proponents of the so-called committed art believe that "creative writing is not 'fiction' if it presents scenarios that are edifying and educational" (2). She defends this writing arguing that it is such writers who "understand the function of fiction and the ways in which local readers seek to organise their lives through popular narratives" (2). Ogude and Nyairo (2004) in similar vein argue that Wanjala and Knight, among other critics, have failed to appreciate the different ways in which these writers of popular fiction reworked the Western modes of literary expression to fit their needs. Indeed, it was thus not so much an imitation as an appropriation of foreign literary forms.

There are several other conceptual contradictions within the 'Wanjala School' that we need to reflect upon. Angela Smith (1989) provides one of the most revealing of these contradictions in the literary criticism of the Kenyan popular novel. Smith complains that novels that are "successfully analytic and synthetic

are comparatively rare [in East Africa]" (12). While acknowledging that African popular fiction deals with social and political issues, she is equally quick to point out that the number of East African novelists who succeed in providing "an insight into the moving spirit of an era is, *of course*, small" (12) (emphasis mine). Smith has categorised Kenyan popular literature into two groups. She distinguishes between "popular" and the "sensational popular" as "types" of Kenyan popular literature. According to Smith, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* is "popular" literature while Charles Mangua's *Son of Woman* and Mwangi Ruheni's *The Minister's Daughter* are examples of the "sensational popular". Stylistically, Ngugi's writings are not only markedly different from those of Mangua and Ruheni, they are also "superior". While that might indeed be true, it is Smith's basis for such distinctions that is problematic. Criticizing Ruheni's writing, Smith describes *The Minister's Daughter* as a "social document, a record of an attitude to fiction, and of a publisher's view of what would sell, but it does not provide an insight into an era" (16). She likens *The Minister's Daughter* to Mangua's *Son of Woman*, from which she cites and disparages the following excerpt:

> *Son of woman,* that's me. I am a louse, a blinking louse and I am the jigger in your toe. I am a hungry jigger and I like to bite. I like to bite women – beautiful women. Women with tits that bounce. If you do not like the idea you are the type I am least interested in (Mangua, 1971: 7).

The following is Smith's critique:

> [t]he limitations of the mode are equally evident from the first paragraph: the dated British slang (blinking, tits) combines *uneasily* with local words (jigger) and the grammar of American pulp fiction… Here we encounter a staple device of the eighteenth century British fiction in updated form; it is

> treated with *self-indulgent sentimentality* and a *bizarre* mixture of styles (17) (emphasis mine).

Smith describes Mangua's writing as "*a kind* of popular fiction" (ibid.). She also argues that unlike Meja Mwangi, Achebe and Ngugi whose works require "a participating reader," Mangua's writing is "imitative" (ibid.). Here, one notices a similarity between Smith and Wanjala's criticism of the Kenyan popular writer. To argue that popular writings do not require a participating reader is to ignore some of the things that make these writings popular. Indeed, I want to argue that on the contrary, there is a tendency in popular fiction for authors to employ deliberate "narrative gaps", which readers are expected to "fill up". The reader is then forced to actively participate in making meaning of the popular narrative. One may also in fact argue that the language and themes Ruheni and Mangua address are a reflection of the times in which they wrote. These works are products of an era, providing insights into an emerging urban culture. It also appears that Smith and Wanjala have been keen on an undefined strand of syncretism in the Kenyan novel. The criticism of the "dated British slang fitting uneasily with local words in *Son of Woman*" is a good example. Mangua borrowed from popular expressions circulating especially in Nairobi in the 1970s and for his audience, it is unlikely there was anything "bizarre" about the juxtaposition of the "jigger with the bouncing tits". This is the kind of appropriation Ogude and Nyairo (2004) refer to above. It is a deliberate synthesis of cultural imagery with the popular expressions from the urban space and Western thrillers. These writers are aware of the two worlds that make up their readers. These are readers possibly bred in the village with the jiggers, but they have also been exposed to the urban thrillers of "bouncing tits" published in Western fiction. Such a synthesis even in terms of language alone is not uncommon in the urban areas in Kenya. Indeed, the emergent urban lingua in Nairobi and other urban areas in Kenya, *Sheng*', now increasingly used in

Kenyan popular fiction consists of expressions appropriated from both worlds. These critics ignore what Raoul Granqvist (1990) has noted as the "narratological pluralism of African literature, its openness for narrative diversity, its extempore quality" (8). They fail to sufficiently appreciate the "polymorphic line of narration, based on obliged interaction… and self-regulatory social interference" (ibid.). It is a point also made by Newell (2002) who notes that because African popular literature is produced outside the genre-determining relationships that characterise Western popular fiction, African texts are less rigid in their adherence to literary formulas and in consequence "authors remain receptive to wider varieties of intertexual currents" (3). From Ngugi's reliance on oral forms of narration and tales from the Agikuyu to Okot p' Bitek's rhythmic translations of Acholi poetry, to Mutahi's appropriation of urban lingua and circulating popular expressions in *Whispers*, Kenyan popular fiction is receptive to "wider varieties of intertextual currents". In terms of literary aesthetics therefore, Kenyan popular fiction has a strong syncretic character that need to be evaluated on its own terms.

Similarly, Smith's argument about the self-indulgent sentimentality of the popular novel echoes the now contested claim about popular literature being necessarily carefree. The literary paternalism with which some critics look upon African popular literature particularly shines through in Smith's generous appraisal of the novels of Nuruddin Farah as a contrast to Kenyan popular fiction. Quoting Farah (1982), she writes, "good writing is subversive, bad writing is not" (24). She agrees with Farah's interest in writers who "explode conventions… writers and works that disturb preconceptions, whether artistic, moral or philosophical" (Smith, 1989: 27). Ironically, this is in actual fact what Mangua does, "exploding convention". Smith praises Farah's works in part because they are peppered with "quotations from and references to Soyinka, Blake, Melville, Achebe, Yeats, Dickens, Kierkegaard, Beckett and Conrad among

others" (27). The irony here is blunt because while Smith criticises Mangua and Ruheni, precisely because they "break convention" by "mixing the jiggers and the bouncing tits", a mixture of Soyinka, Yeats, Dickens and Conrad seems to be the kind of "subversive" writing that Smith calls "good writing".

Similar conceptual contradictions have marked the criticism of Tanzanian literature where as Felicitus Becker in her translation of the Kiswahili novel, *Dar-es-Salaam Usiku* argues, Kiswahili speaking scholars distinguish between "serious literature" and "trash" in Tanzanian literature (cited in Newell, 2002: 3). Newell further points out that these scholars are keen to "protect the high quality (and commitment to political conscientisation) of literature produced within their language zones" (ibid.). Similarly, in Nigeria, Newell notes that popular Hausa literature has elicited similar controversy. Apparently concerned about the upsurge of *soyayya* books, Sani Aba and Jibril Ibrahim (1995) protest against "a kind of popular literature in Hausa literature" (cited in Newell, 2002: 3), perhaps the Nigerian variant of the "sensational popular" that Smith talks about in Kenya. They complain:

> [t]he writing is conceived and executed in a rush. The author is usually the printer/publisher… these young authors, equipped with relatively low educational standards, are putting to shame serious Hausa literary establishment (ibid.).

The point I am making here is that the 'Africanist discourse' tradition that has dominated the criticism of African literature fails to recognise certain realities against which African popular literature should be judged. The conflation of the popular with the "uncritical and uncommitted" and the dichotomy of committed/non committed literature, based on the theme of politics and a largely Western influenced aesthetics as the only tool for the evaluation of

African literature reinforced the marginal stature of Kenyan popular literature. But limiting literary activity to aesthetic narcissism and politics is itself very restrictive. At the risk of sounding rhetorical, I want to agree with Ehling (1990) that evaluative judgements that have for long defined the canon in Africa are very often based upon the

> prejudices of a minority, an aesthetically educated elite, which, on the one hand, rigidly seeks to employ its own—elitist—perspective, but on the other hand is not willing to acknowledge the fact that the different varieties of literature are but pictures of highly complex social formations (156).

In recent times however, popular literature in Kenya is beginning to enjoy a fairly cordial relationship with the critic and publisher. Critics such as Jacqueline Bardolph, Nici Nelson, Jane Bryce among others now form a new group of critics who have attempted to examine what makes popular literature 'popular' in Kenya. A few notable characteristics stand out. Bardolph (1998), for instance, notes that a significant majority of the Kenyan popular texts tackle 'popular' or commonplace issues but also in a manner that is demonstrably didactic, hence their 'popularity' as readers apply these texts to their lives. She notes that popular texts in Kenya and East Africa in general rely heavily on "referential interest" (126). The narratives generally "hold a kind of mirror to the public in their sociological stocktaking, which is more likely to hold one's attention than commonplace intrigues" (ibid.). The narratives therefore immerse their readers in a life they already inhabit, providing templates for self-reflection and at the same time offering advice on how the readers can improve their lives. Besides, most of these popular texts revolve around the problems faced by their readers.

Bardolph also emphasises the salience of 'moral narratives' in Kenyan popular fiction. She notes that most popular texts in Kenya revolve around moral points and stories, often reinforced by proverbs, tales and experiences appropriated from local cultures. To this end, most popular writings especially tend to revolve around the theme of 'crime and punishment'. Indeed, the publishing success of the popular novel in the late 1970s through the 1980s in Kenya can partly be explained by the relevance of the twin themes of "crime and punishment". Nici Nelson (1986) on her part focuses primarily on gender representation, examining how gender is constructed within the dialectic of the urban and rural spaces in Kenya. Nelson sees this representation as providing a useful entry into the reading of the popular novel in Kenya. The topicality of gender relations especially in the context of changing social relations owing to rapid social transformation makes gender issues notably 'popular'. The importance of this representation is also underscored by Gikandi (2003), who observes that writers focus on the representation of the woman as an entry to reading the "dramatic story of the new nation" (161). The popular novel in Kenya thus negotiates its themes, style and language with its reader. It is precisely because of this "obliged interaction" between writer and reader that makes this writing popular.

The visibility of the Kenyan popular novel especially in academic circles can be traced to the late 1960s with the publication of pioneering works by writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Okot p' Bitek. Popular fiction within the newspaper however only gained prominence in the mid 1970s. Although these columns had been published in the Kenyan vernacular press, *Joe* magazine published by Hillary Ng'weno and Terry Hirst, among other popular magazines such as *Drum,* can be said to have popularised this genre. Not only was fiction among the main features of these magazines, they also acted as spaces for apprenticeship for budding writers, giving rise to a corps who later published similar columns in mainstream newspapers and later, novels. *Joe* was established

in 1973 but went under in 1979 having nonetheless set a 'formula' that was to later define the 'popular fiction' genre in the newspaper and popular magazine in Kenya. Successors to the fiction published in *Joe* were few and far between and none as versatile and resilient as *Whispers* which was to last two decades. Similar columns which ran over the same period and after the collapse of *Joe*, in the mainstream press included *Masharubu's World, Norman the Nomad, Kibao, Benson's World* and *Urbanite,* among others.

The early 1980s in Kenya particularly marked the growth of this genre in the mainstream newspaper. This period was attended by significant developments in Kenya's political history, developments which impacted just as significantly on the production of the 'popular'. This period witnessed a wave of ruthless state repression especially intensified after an attempted coup to topple the government of Daniel Moi in 1982. In the process of consolidating his political power, the Moi government reined in on many writers, journalists, intellectuals and politicians perceived as dissident. Some were forced into exile while others were incarcerated. In the early 1990s, for instance, many a time journalists would be arrested for publishing reports that were "likely to cause fear, alarm and despondency" (See *Africa Watch Report: Kenya Taking Liberties*, 1991). The Newspapers Act, introduced in the 1950s under the British colonial government, ensured that the government kept tabs on the press without necessarily shutting them down. The Act requires all publications to post a Bond with the government before they commence publication. Copies of each issue of a publication must then be registered with the Registrar of Books and Newspapers. Magazines are required to submit their annual returns and fill in a form for inspection by the Registrar General. Small print publications were constantly banned or fined for contravening these provisions of the Act although these normally provided the government the opportunity to ban hostile publications (*Africa Watch Report: Kenya Taking Liberties*, 1991). Later, numerous libel suits and

defamation fines forced most of the small print publications under. Although some of these publications were unabashedly partisan, they provide examples of the seriousness with which the government held the print media and certainly the nature of the political climate at the time. Among the publications banned in the late 1980s through the early 1990s included *Beyond*, a monthly magazine published by the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK). Others included *Financial Review*, a weekly financial magazine, *Nairobi Law Monthly*, *Finance*, *Economic Review* and *Society*. These magazines were edited mostly by human rights lawyers and journalists, who were also engaged in political activism. Among them were Gitobu Imanyara (*Nairobi Law Monthly*), Njehu Gatabaki (*Finance*), Pius Nyamora (*Society*) and Bedan Mbugua (*Beyond*).

Meanwhile, national economic decline led to widespread disillusionment and political anxiety. Free speech was promptly muzzled even with certain apparently liberal legal provisions. It is through various forms of cultural production such as music, theatre and fiction that Kenyans began to create new expressive spaces. Although it is important to note that *Whispers* was not directly born as a result of the repressive nature of the 1980s, it was to later follow into the discourse of social and political reform. The column gradually acquired a reputation as a forum for the "hushed, the scandalous, the mysterious", its character defined by its subversive streak (Mbugua wa Mungai, 2004). The column's narratives were located within a largely oppositional cultural and political aesthetic that seemed to define various sites of cultural production at the time, even though it is more appropriate to look at the column as a fiction of multiple narratives.

The 1980s through the early 1990s in Kenya also witnessed a form of "cultural revivalism" and a resurgence of various nationalisms, especially ethnic. Ogude (2004) argues after Said (1994) that forced exclusion from mainstream politics

and economic development often leads to a desire for restoration—the longing for integration as a social group or community. It engenders a strong sense of communal nationalism in order to fend off exile and to deal with its ravages (261). It is the exclusionary practices of the political elite that in part led to the disillusionment of the 1980s in Kenya. Ngunyi (1996) argues that in such situations, the state witnesses a precarious balance between polarised power centres, "the authority of the state, compromised politically and economically and a political periphery formed from an alliance of (forces) marginalized by the state but still unable, as yet, to force the centre to devolve power" (184). Ngunyi further notes that in Kenya, struggles associated with this polarisation have either taken on an "ethno-regional form or, to a lesser extent, an ethno religious character…" (ibid.). Indeed, to emerge as result of this state of 'internal exile' were radical groups that were at once cultural, sometimes political, yet other times religious. These included Ngonya wa Gakonya's *Tent of the Living God*, a quasi-religious group which oscillated between religion and politics, *Mungiki* another 'cultural/political' posse of quasi-cultural Kikuyu activists. This group also flirted with religion, cultural activism and politics. Others like the Release Political Prisoners (RPP) also agitated for reform on a cultural plane (See Outa, 2002). Musicians such as D.O Misiani, Ogude (2004) notes, positioned themselves as voices of protest. Misiani's music, for instance, postured as a voice for the Luo community who for decades had apparently been excluded from state structures. Ogude argues that Misiani used the Luo as "a moral and political category… reconstituting them as an oppressed nationhood in need of liberation" (4). All these groups who for disparate reasons were enjoined in the agitation for social and political reform, made politics a powerful theme in a number of writers' literary agenda.

It is within this narrative locale that I want to situate *Whispers*. Not only was the column's resilience in a characteristically uncertain period unique, its mediation

of the 'popular' informed largely by a sense of 'resistance' made it a particularly popular column. Although most of the issues the column discussed were mediated in other sites such as theatre, music and other forms of cultural production, including fiction columns, this column stands out for a number of reasons. The column appears to have struck a certain chord with its audiences becoming a popular newspaper 'product'. It was 'marketed' as a unique product in the newspaper and was often boldly 'advertised' in the Saturday newspapers and on the front pages of the Sunday newspapers. Mutahi, like Misiani, postured as a voice of those who felt alienated from the centre. But it is also important to recognise the fact that this column benefited from institutional support of major media organisations unlike similar work published by small publishers. The *Nation* and the *Standard* have elaborate distribution networks that ensure they are available in most parts of the country. But how does one define the 'popular' in the context of *Whispers*?

Re-reading the 'Popular'

Dominic Strinati (1995)), among other scholars, argues that the emergence of popular culture as an area of academic study has witnessed contributions from a number of disciplines including literature, literary criticism, history, psychoanalysis and psychology. Thus, it is not possible to approach it from a single disciplinary perspective. A broad framework of contributions from various fields, some of which are only of peripheral relevance, therefore guides this study. A starting point to the study is to engage with the concept of the 'popular' and particularly in relation to its use in the popular arts.

As an area of academic inquiry, the study of popular culture has largely been influenced by Euro-American literary traditions where the production, distribution and consumption of culture has for long been seen as hierarchical—elite/popular/traditional. In these traditions, the 'popular' is said to constitute

'low class' culture viewed against a more sophisticated culture of the elite—high culture. Barber (1997) gives an example of the conflation of the 'popular' with "low class" using the play Henry V. In Act IV Scene 1 the character Pistol asks the disguised Henry V, "Discuss unto me; art thou officer?/ Or art thou base, common and popular?" (3). From writers such as Aristotle who equated popular literature with the carnivalesque—the "actions of comedians, revellers, the meaner sort of people, the ridiculous", to Shakespeare, to the post-war Frankfurt School of F.R Leavis and Mathew Arnold, popular culture has long been associated with the lowly, and the popular literature writer specifically defined as "a purveyor of rag-bag language and rag-bag characters" (Dosch, 1965: 7 cited in Wanjala, 2003). The 'popular' was deemed a threat to the values of polite society, "standardised" and said to promote "passive consumption". However, a group of scholars, mainly cultural historians and anthropologists among them Roger Chartier and in recent times Karin Barber have disputed the concept of the 'popular' as only representing "low class" culture even in European cultural traditions. In a research on 16th and 17th Century French texts, Chartier discovered that it was not possible "to find strict correspondences between cultural cleavages and social hierarchies" (cited in Barber, 1997: 3). Instead, he realised that there was a "fluid circulation of practices shared by various groups", which blurred class distinctions (ibid.). The lower echelons of society, he observed, indulged in genres "not considered specific to them; and elites only slowly distanced themselves from common culture" (ibid.). More recent work by scholars such as Storey (2003) have confirmed this observation. Indeed, Storey argues that equating popular culture to a less sophisticated social category merely reflects the anxieties of the elite eager to "invent" an other on whom to blame societal decay.

The uniqueness of cultural experiences in Africa posits equally unique challenges to the study of popular culture. This thesis adopts a new set of evaluative criteria

popularised by scholars such as Barber (1997) and Newell (2000). These scholars argue that the fluidity in cultural production in Africa has made the hierarchical classification of culture highly untenable. Barber (1997) notes that there is a "vast domain of cultural production that straddle and dissolve various distinctions" (2). Veit Erlman (1991) makes a similar observation arguing that in Africa,

> you cannot deduce an individual's position in the social process, his or her class position, from the musical forms, styles and genres he or she performs, listens to or patronises. A worker who participates in collective performance of rural wedding songs is not necessarily less proletarianised than the one who patronises soccer clubs and discos (4).

Bennet (1998) and Ogude and Nyairo (2004) similarly argue that with the proliferation of new modernities such as the Internet and the satellite television, lower echelons of society now share the social spaces and make use of motifs and genres that may not be considered specific to them and the reverse is true of the elite even if they occasionally try to distance themselves from cultures emanating from below. Giving the example of Kenya, but a point potentially applicable to many societies in Africa, Mbugua wa Mungai (2004) also points out the blurring of demarcations between the "high and low" as more people gain access to what have for long been markers of social privilege. He gives the example of the 'public' access to TV pay channels such as DSTV or NBC as Nairobi restaurant and bar owners install satellite dishes for their patrons. The increasing access to these new modernities continues to have profound influence on the production and consumption of popular cultural artefacts in many African societies. As Ogude and Nyairo (2004) put it, social mobility of cultural artefacts or even of their appropriation across social boundaries is not something that is specifically confined to one group. I therefore approach the 'popular' in this thesis as an amalgam of various voices not confined to society's underclass. Indeed, in the

situation of a country like Kenya one also needs to look at the fluidity of class formations in which an elite culture, for example may be difficult to define because of its fragmented and intermediary position. The middle class in Africa, as Frantz Fanon (1991) observes, is largely undeveloped and quite often still maintains very strong bonds of kinship with ethnic groups, clans, extended families and particular ethno-regions. In the essay "Pitfalls of National Consciousness", Fanon describes the middle class in Africa as having practically no economic power and that this class is not commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the colonial powers it hopes to replace. Fanon notes that this class is characterised by its smallness and that because it is not engaged in production, "it is completely canalised into the activities of the intermediary type" (150). My point is that the idea of class in Africa is notoriously fluid and thus, as Schatzberg (1988) similarly suggests, contingent upon context and the moment. A number of scholars have thus argued that the individual actor in Africa can and does belong to different class alliances at the same time. I therefore want to argue, after Keller (1981) that at one time and under certain circumstances, clan identities or ethnicity might provide the basis for action, at another, a sense of national identity or social class interest might spark conflict and change (548-9). Chabal's (1986) analysis sums up the fragmented nature of the elite in Africa. He argues,

> [t]he high, if it exists at all, is not the prerogative of an ancient ruling class but of a fragmented, precarious, conflictual new elite, defined by its proximity to an outside power, but nonetheless bound up with local populations by innumerable ties of kinship, language, community membership and patronage. The people are neither the rural, idyllically remembered 'folk' nor the urban industrial proletariat… rather they are unstable congeries of differentially defined groups, linguistic, ethnic, occupational, and religious, only thinkable as a category in that they are

> excluded from the privileges of the political, business and military elites (cited in Barber, 1997: 3-4).

The idea of class should also be understood against the African postcolonial reality where the state monopolises power so much so that the middle class is just as disempowered as the so-called lower classes. Indeed, one must note that *Whispers* revolves around the life of an urban middle class family, trying to grapple with the existential dilemmas of the Kenyan subject. This middle class family however shares much with those commonly referred to as the underclass. The column therefore explores not just middle class anxieties but 'popular' issues which are just as relevant to the lower echelons of society. The very fact that this column was published in a national newspaper does in a sense also reveal its target audience. It is an audience that is literate, possesses some disposable income but still a part of the subject population. This certainly has implications on our understanding of 'the popular'.

In Africa, one also finds informative Hall's (1982) interesting observation that the 'popular' comprises

> classes and forces which constitute the popular classes. The culture of the oppressed, the excluded classes … the opposite to that side with cultural power to decide what belongs and what does not, which is by definition another whole class, but that other alliance of classes, strata and social forces which constitute what is not 'the people' and not the 'popular classes', the culture of the power bloc (238).

Hall therefore argues that "the people versus the power bloc; this rather than the class against class is the central line of contradiction around which the terrain of culture is polarised… Popular culture is organised around the contradiction

between the popular forces versus the power bloc" (ibid.). This argument introduces us to another strand of the 'popular' that has influenced the study of popular culture; the idea of 'the people'. Barber (1997) talks about the 'popular' having "a powerful sense of the people, naming the inequality they suffer from, and recognising them, often with humour and bitter irony, their own struggle and endurance" (4). She argues that these people name their suffering "because it is important to keep its memory which is itself empowering" (5). Commenting on a 'popular' song titled *Mnyonge Hana Haki* [Trans: The poor have no rights] by Remmy Ongala, a Tanzanian musician whose work is analysed by Werner Graebner in the same volume, Barber argues that Ongala's songs formulate "a powerful vision of confraternity in suffering" (ibid.). Ongala's lyrics are a cry of the oppressed, apparently exasperated at their powerlessness. But the song in a way talks back at the oppressors. In the same volume, David Coplan (1978) also defines the 'popular' in similar terms reiterating that collective suffering engenders the production of the 'popular'. In a study of Basotho migrant workers in South Africa, Coplan argues that because of their life of struggle in South Africa where they work as labourers, the Basotho, "through song deal with the exploitative and disintegrative social conditions… [to]… create for themselves a sense of personal autonomy within which they may truly act" (32). Coplan notes that for the Basotho migrants, "this autonomy is built upon the positive redefinition, through performance, of their human value in opposition to their identity as mere labour units in the political economy of South Africa" (ibid.). The idea of "the people" has however been variously defined. The category of 'the people' is therefore a highly fluid if contested social category. Mattelat (1983) cautions on the ambiguity of this category calling the idea of 'the people' "intoxicating".

> On a positive side, the idea has arisen as a generous some would say, romantic ideal, lyrical, libertarian and democratic… On the negative side,

> the people can be a distorting mirror and an alibi of all sorts of populism and demagoguery. The omnipotent invocation of the popular can in fact hide the absence of concrete people…" (18).

The term has also been invariably used as a tool for political mobilisation**.** Sparks (1992) observes that within the traditional political Left, the term 'the people' has been used to mean "the opposite of the terms which together might be taken as elite…an amalgam of the peasantry, the urban poor, the nascent but not yet independent working class and, in the leading roles, elements of the urban petty bourgeoisie" (25). But Sparks also notes the "shifting" uses of the term by both the Left and the Right who at their convenience imbue the concept with new meanings that merely justify their ideological purposes. Other cultural critics like Hall (1982) have however attempted to address this ambiguity. Hall argues that "the people" is defined by

> what it is not – not the state, the dominant classes, the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie. It corresponds to a class or a group of classes, though the boundaries are not always clearly specified, and the people's culture can be seen as engaged in contests over those boundaries (238).

Another definition of 'the people' can be traced to the Marxist thought, and particularly to the ideas of German scholar/playwright Bertolt Brecht who equated 'the people' with the working class. According to Brecht, the 'popular' was also radical and revolutionary. It is a strand of thought that defined the 'popular' in East Africa in the 1960s through the 1970s especially popularised by the socialist politics of among others Julius Nyerere and later by writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o (See Ogude and Nyairo, 2004). Ngugi's 'people' were however the rural peasantry and the 'popular' not only had to represent their interests, it also had to speak in their idioms. This partly explains Ngugi's

nativist gesture towards oral traditions, and later his adoption of the Gikuyu language in his literary work, although as Ogude (1999) argues, "at least in the sense of appropriating oral forms, this was not so much a rupture but a continuation and a more radical development towards a syncretic use of both Gikuyu and Western modes of creation" (87).

But is the 'popular' necessarily radical and revolutionary? This thesis acknowledges the danger of adopting a "populism" which allows all popular culture to be treated only as a form of (political) resistance. Scholars such as Street (1997) have warned against "the assumption that everywhere, in all acts of cultural consumption, subversive interpretations are being imposed, which somehow empower audiences" (19). Street explains that this is to "ignore the differences between works of popular culture; it is to treat them as a blank screen onto which any idea can be written" (ibid.). In the same vein, Jim McGuigan (1992) warns against the uncritical valorization of the 'popular' because it overlooks "the need for judgment and discrimination in understanding popular culture, the need to select between accuracy and distortion, the genuine and the phoney" (cited in Street, 1997: 19). McGuigan proposes that the "populist reading of popular culture just like the populist reading of politics needs to be replaced by an approach which understands popular culture in terms of institutions that create it and the political ideologies that inform it" (ibid.). While it is true that there are predominantly oppositional practices within the 'popular', it is important that it is approached as an analytical category of multiple narratives even if it is largely located within the realm of an oppositional cultural and political aesthetic. To read *Whispers* is not to engage in a reading of "oppositional politics", it is an appreciation of a complex process of cultural production, an "arena of both consent and resistance" to borrow the words of Hall (1982). While this thesis approaches the idea of the 'popular' as largely defined by the idea of 'the people', I am aware of the contradictions within this social category.

This thesis also uses the 'popular' as defined by its "moralistic" and "didactic" characteristics. According to Etherton (1982), African popular arts attempt to "open the eyes of the masses to their own objective historical situation, the actual conditions of their existence and thus enabling them to empower themselves" (361). Alec Pongweni offers a similar argument in a study of Ngugi's Kamĩrĩĩthu theatre and of Chimurenga music in Zimbabwe (See Barber, 1997: 63). Similarly, Barber argues that ideas about the 'popular' as being carefree have now been replaced by "the recognition that genres billed as entertainment usually talk of matters of deep interest and concern to the people who produce and consume them" (2). Some of the "carefree" pamphlets from Onitsha, Accra and Ibadan for instance, also speak incessantly of the anxieties and dangers facing the urban neophyte/dweller (ibid). Elsewhere, Bryce (1997) finds the African *pacesetters* dealing with serious issues that affect African societies trying to grapple with the challenges of urbanisation. The *pacesetters* are books about the struggle for survival, economic hardships, sexual and economic exploitation, in general terms, the everyday problems of the subaltern. Bryce argues, for instance, that romantic love in these pacesetters, rather than be seen as escapist fantasy, become "a trope for the desire for change, both personal and social, and for the belief in the possibility of change" (cited in Barber, 1997: 6). Barber summarises Bryce's work noting that "stereotyped characters and plots do not prevent writers from dealing with real experiences, and if they wrest a happy ending from their plots, it is hard-worn" (3). Catherine Cole also observes that these texts are used as life manuals by their readers. Indeed, in the study of audiences of the Ghanaian concert party she found out that what might at first be presumed escapist are not taken as such by the Ghanaian readerships. Instead, essential features of characters and situations are used to interpret social experiences. Fabian equally recognises African popular arts as a site where "perceptions, experiences and problems are worked out in an open never-ending

process" (cited in Barber 1997: 6) while Achebe (1965) briefly summarises the didactic character of African popular literature, saying that the (popular) novelist in Africa remains above all, 'a teacher'.

This 'popular' in Africa has also been traditionally associated with an organic, authentic, unchanging past. But I do not subscribe to this statism. Instead, I approach the 'popular' as a living cultural process. Indeed, in recent times, it is in the urban centres that one sees most popular fiction work situated because it is these new spaces where social transformation is best manifest. The latter day popular writer in West, South and East Africa arose primarily out of a burgeoning urban culture in these parts of the continent. S/he tapped into the themes that largely emerged out of the urban space. Onitsha Market literature is heavily indebted to the emergence of Onitsha as a major urban centre in the Niger Delta. The "*Drum* literature" found inspiration in an increasingly urbanised Johannesburg while the Kenyan popular writer tapped into themes of crime, love and sex, whose increased visibility was partly because of the socio-cultural changes intensified by urbanisation.

I also examine the 'popular' from an aesthetic perspective. Here, emphasis is placed on its openness to experimentation, so that it is seen as a medley that presupposes a large audience. African popular texts are especially 'parasitic', allowing a great deal of borrowing and experimentation. Many popular fiction writers deliberately ignore canonical conventions and in the process stretch the boundaries of local literary expression. Indeed, African popular literature can now be described as "notoriously undisciplined" (Macherey, 1978). Newell (2002) argues that to define popular fiction in Africa, we must note that local practitioners constantly absorb "new cultural currents, poach upon so-called 'traditional' and 'elite' cultural discourses, adapt and innovate and operate outside of 'official' art forms" (45). Other critics like Ulf Harnnez therefore see

the 'popular' as "stretching horizontally from the bush to the metropolitan centres, taking in Onitsha, Sophiatown and Nairobi on their way" (cited in Barber, 1997: 6). Similarly, Barber (1997) underscores African popular arts' "ability to draw in and creatively absorb materials from the outside in order to fuel local contests and projects" (6) without being pulled into the West's magnetic field (See also Bayart, 1993). Bogumil Jewsiewicki describes this absorption as an "extraversion…a cannibalisation but one which does not involve loss of identity on the part of the cultural intermediaries who perform it" (cited in Barber, 1997: 6). The syncretism of African popular literature is such that it cannibalises or feeds on other cultures while at the same time retaining an identity against which it defines its peculiarity. Lindfors (1991) thus comments that Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Maillu's *Unfit for Human Consumption* are all disparate manifestations of essentially the same creative impulse; to speak to as many people as possible. The basis for the comparison here, it seems, lies not in "representation" but primarily in the idioms of expression grafted into the works of these writers. Indeed, while Ngugi and Achebe heavily borrow from the traditional idioms of the Gikuyu and Ibo respectively, Maillu's idioms are derived from Kenya's urban space. The three writers are however all interested in expanding their reading publics by using a language that these publics find most appealing. It is the positions outlined above that guide this thesis especially in my reading of the 'popular'.

This thesis examines *Whispers* within the context of the 'popular's representation of two main analytical categories: those that relate to socio-cultural issues, and the 'popular' as mediating questions around power. As such, I first interrogate how the column explores the effects of urbanisation on the Kenyan subject. Urbanisation is narrated as a fragmentary affair in which the Kenya(n) becoming is torn between various worlds. *Whispers* demonstrates the continuous negotiation with the numerous changes that now confront the Kenyan subject.

On the 'popular''s exploration of questions of power, my point of entry is that popular culture offers a "critical corrective to state-centric analytical models of politics that represent institutions as the sole loci of power" (Kelly, 2002: 14). Like Bayart (1993) suggests in the *Politics of the Belly,* a discussion of power in Africa cannot be limited to "regimes of statements which exclude the subject of enunciation". It must include "the people involved, the social strategies as the material basis of this 'governmentality'" (xx). Popular fiction often tells the story from the position of the subject.

Any culturally oriented work on African politics, Michael Karlstrom (2003) among other critics have argued, cannot avoid Mbembe's discussions of power in the postcolony. Mbembe (1992a) recommends there is need for research to go "beyond institutions, beyond formal positions of power and the written rules, and examine the way the implicit and explicit are interwoven …" (29). It is in the realm of popular culture that I want to examine this 'entanglement'. This thesis adopts the view that the public face of power in the postcolony is largely a performance. Indeed, Mbembe has described the postcolony as a *'simulacrum'*, a regime in which "the people pretend to obey and the rulers pretend to believe in their obedience, resulting in an inescapable cycle of pointless violence and cynical laughter"(1992a). In his study of the Cameroon and other West African states, Mbembe adopts and partly pioneers a unique approach to the study of power in Africa. He focuses on the salience and the symbolic importance of the obscene and the grotesque as entries into understanding the aesthetics or modalities of power in the postcolony. His analysis begins with Bakhtin's (1984) discussions of the use of bawdy humour and the carnival tradition in medieval Europe. Although Bakhtin attributed this 'folk' tradition to the "province of ordinary people" and thus read this site as one for oppositional discourses, Mbembe points out that these traditions are in fact spread across social classes. He rejects the notion that this carnival tradition subverted "official culture".

Instead, he argues, such imagery is generated by the state and it is the state that constitutes "the principal locus of both self-narration of power and the places in which it imagines itself" (1992b: 9) But Mbembe's criticism of Bakhtin has itself been a source of other criticisms. Karlstrom (2003), for instance, points out Mbembe's failure to locate Bakhtin's argument within its cultural and historical context. Karlstrom argues that Bakhtin did not propose "a transhistorical theory of the political valence of bodily humour" (62). He "historicized the oppositional role of humour by noting that in earlier social formations the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally official" (ibid). Karlstrom, among other Mbembe's critics also raise objections to his notable ambivalence over the emancipatory potential of forms of popular culture such as humour. According to Mbembe, "popular bursts of hilarity are actually taking the official world seriously", and "people who laugh are only reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of the *commandement*" (1992a: 8). Mbembe explains that he uses the term *commandement* to "denote what the colonial authority, that is in so far as it embraces the images and structures of power and coercion, the instruments and agents of their enactment, and a degree of rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey them, without of course discussing them" (30). He argues that "although these processes [humour, laughter] may …demystify the *commandement* or even erode its legitimacy, it does not do violence to the *commandement's* base. At best, it creates pockets of indiscipline on which the *commandement* may stub its toe, though otherwise it glides unperturbed over them" (10). Consequently, for Mbembe (1992a), the postcolonial relationship is not one of resistance and collaboration but one that

> can best be characterised as illicit cohabitation, a relationship made fraught by the very fact of the *commandement* and its subjects having to share the same living space. It is precisely because of this logic—the

> necessary familiarity and domesticity in the relationship—that explains… the refusal to be captured, the contradiction between overt acts and gestures in public and the covert responses made underground (4).

Mbembe argues that instead, this relationship has resulted in the "mutual zombification of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate. This zombification means that each robbed the other of their vitality and has left them both impotent (*impouvoir*)" (ibid.). But is this necessarily true? Is the relationship between the potentate and the subject necessarily intimate and fatalistic? I want to agree with Karlstom's objections to Mbembe's analysis which he does using the Baganda as a case study of how political relations are "staged", in an effort to explain the element of reciprocity in political relations in Africa. When the Baganda invite political leaders to their villages, they partly partake in what Mbembe calls the "corporeal extravagance of power", but then with an end in mind. They deluge their leaders with praises, compete to offer the fattest ram, but at the same time expect their leader to meet his obligations as a leader by contributing to their welfare. If the leader fails to demonstrate that which makes him a leader, for instance, by not contributing towards the project for which he is invited, he is rejected. The element of reciprocity and of 'ritual dialogism' thus underwrites this relationship. Karlstrom thus argues that "the underlying logic of popular political subjectivity also contains resources for the sort of critical consciousness of which Mbembe despairs" (72). According to Karlstrom, "if critical responses by non-state political imaginaries are incapable of disciplining state power and holding it accountable to popular demands, this limitation is not intrinsic to the idiom of critique…" (ibid.). Popular culture might not necessarily lead to revolutions precisely because it is not at this level that it operates. Indeed, as Karlstrom observes, "it does not ipso facto constitute resistance. But it is a form of critical consciousness nonetheless" (ibid.) I therefore want to call attention to the fact that this thesis adopts especially Mbembe's approach to the

study of the performance of power in the postcolony but with certain provisos. Mbembe's framework is only useful insofar as it provides an entry into examining what Karlstrom (2003) describes as "official-popular interface as a dialogical process of reciprocal influence in the context of a (partially) shared cosmology of power" (64).

My discussion also involves a discussion of the techniques Bayart (1993) has described as the "techniques of evasion and pretence" (254) that characterise daily life in Kenya as points of entry to understanding the modalities of power in Kenya, through a reading of the 'popular'. These techniques show how "small men take refuge in things which cannot be stolen in order to escape from the incessant thefts of the authorities" (ibid.). To this end, I find Scott's (1990) discussions of the 'public and hidden transcripts' especially significant. Scott explains how those who occupy subordinate positions in societies that are oppressive have an extensive social existence outside the immediate control of the dominant forces, positions that provide a healthy breeding ground for critiques of domination. He defines 'hidden transcripts' as "discourse that takes place offstage, beyond the observation of the power holders, and which tend to confirm, inflect, qualify or contradict the public transcript" (16). Through these scripts, the dominated manage to archive and process a whole range of interpretations of their experiences. These 'hidden transcripts' include the use of rumour, humour and heresay. Thus for instance, to paraphrase Mbugua wa Mungai (2004), in Mutahi's humour is constituted a repertory of irreverence to symbolically contest certain 'commonsense practices' as a critique of power. Rumour similarly becomes a site and a means of social and political critique.

I also acknowledge the analytical potential of Young and Turner's (1985) ideas of "existence" in the African postcolony, a position shared by Michael Schatzberg especially in his discussion of political culture and social dynamics in Zaire.

Young and Turner classify the African postcolony into "zones of existence" (politico-commercial class) and zones of "non-existence" (the lower classes). The relationship between these two zones is not necessarily that pitting oppressor against the oppressed. In fact, belonging to either of these zones is not immutable. One belongs to either zone depending on his/her proximity to the "centre of privilege" at a given point in time. At once the subject population is a victim, at another he is complicit in his domination. Schatzberg (1988) in similar vein argues that the degree of class identity in Africa vary depending upon geographic, social, political and economic junctures of the moment in question. The "social class and the state compose the context in which ethnicity becomes salient. Similarly the context in which social class comes to the fore might well be a combination of ethnicity and the state. So, too, for the state"(11). The "triple helix", a term Schatzberg uses to describe the interaction between the state, class and ethnicity, is therefore continuously reconstituted. I therefore read the performance of power in Kenya as enacted in *Whispers* as a dialectic made possible by the vacillation between and within the two zones described above. At play within this dialectic are the variables such as class, ethnicity, gender, tribe to name but a few.

I also want to call attention to the fact that this research straddles aspects of both popular literature as well as media studies. As noted earlier, *Whispers* must be seen both as a literary and as a media text. Barber (1997) rightly observes that although "there has been little written about how African popular audiences undertake the work of interpretation, there is ample evidence that they do undertake it, that they see expressive genres as inviting attention, discussion and decipherment" (8). The thesis explores how texts can be re-energised or influenced by audiences. I argue that a writer is always in commune with the reader in the text. The thesis works on the premise that writers do not write to an anonymous public, instead they imagine their publics and define/construct them

through various strategies. I therefore attempt a discussion of how *publics* are "inscribed" in *Whispers* thus finding useful some audience research traditions. First, I argue that audiences are not what Tiffin (1996) describes as "obedient subjects of texts" (cited in Hofmeyr, 2001: 322) but active participants in the process of meaning-making. Among other scholars, Tester (1994), Voloshinov (1988), and Fiske (1987b) underscore the dialogic nature of the 'text'. The thesis does not agree with the idea that texts "create obedient subjects" but acknowledges that texts are, to quote Hofmeyr (2001), "imbued with extraordinary powers" (323) and are therefore able to imagine, construct and manipulate audiences. This work finds particularly useful, Michael Warner's (1996) discussion of 'publics'. Warner describes 'publics' as self-creating and self-organised, largely through shared discourse (52). Warner argues that texts generate 'publics' but the discourses within the text have to be in circulation as part of those publics. I therefore locate *Whispers* within a broader context since the column feeds off circulating discourses, which also structure how it is written, how its narratives operate and how the column is ultimately consumed.

A Note on Kenyan Newspapers

There are four main English daily newspapers in Kenya namely *The Daily Nation*, *The East African Standard*, *Kenya Times* and *The People* among a plethora of other small print publications. *Whispers* was published at alternate times in the Sunday editions of *The Sunday Nation* and *The East African Standard* newspapers. The *Nation* as it is popularly known, is reported to be the largest selling newspaper in Kenya. Conservative estimates put *The Nation's* circulation at 165,000 copies and an overall readership estimated at almost 3 million.[1] *The Nation* was set up by His Highness the Aga Khan in 1960. At inception, it was, in familiar colonial parlance, intended at "helping Kenya and other East African territories make the transition to African majority rule and full independence as peacefully and as

[1] See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3863401.stm. Accessed on December, 8, 2004

constructively as possible".[2] The Nation Media Group (NMG), which is the holding company of the newspaper, now has regional shareholding and has expanded into a multi-million dollar media empire with interests in neighbouring Uganda and Tanzania. Besides running a television station and an FM radio station in Kenya, the Group also acquired Uganda's Monitor Publications Limited, which publishes *The Monitor* newspaper and also runs an FM station based in Kampala. In 2003, the Group acquired majority shareholding in Tanzania's Mwananchi Communications Limited (MCL) and Radio Uhuru Limited (RUL). MCL publishes Kiswahili titles *Mwananchi* and *Mwana Spoti*. The NMG's financial clout even during the Moi era ensured it remained comparatively free when its competitors were either run by government proxies or easily bullied into political acquiescence. According to *Expression Today*, a media journal published by the Media Institute in Kenya, attempts by powerful government functionaries to buy a controlling stake in the NMG during the Moi era failed. Instead, the government "exercised subtle influence on the group through its principal shareholder the Aga Khan who enjoyed cordial relations with then President Daniel Moi".[3] The Aga Khan was unsurprisingly one of the major investors in Kenya owning a string of hotels, schools and hospitals among other lucrative businesses. While the Group's two titles *The Daily Nation* and *The Sunday Nation* were widely regarded as independent, sometimes even unapologetically oppositional during Moi's rule, the extent to which the Moi government defined its "independence" cannot be ignored.

The East African Standard on the other hand is the oldest newspaper in East Africa. It was established in 1902 by an Asian immigrant A.M Jeevanjee in Mombasa but later moved to Nairobi in 1910. Currently over a century old, its editorial trail is described by *Expression Today* as "an engaging archive of the

[2] See http//www.kenyanews.com/Archives/mainsto/medst_.html Accessed on September, 10, 2004
[3] See http//www.kenyanews.com/Archives/mainsto/medst_.html Accessed on September, 10, 2004

historic events that have shaped Kenya and indeed East Africa's history. That history also bears the imprint of those who owned the newspaper at different times". In its early years, *The Standard* as it became popularly known was largely a voice of the settler community in Kenya. However, Ainslie (1966) notes that at independence, the newspaper's editorial tone shifted with Jomo Kenyatta the erstwhile "evil genius" becoming the man to "thank for Kenya's peaceful transition to independence" (cited in Bougalt, 1995: 163-4). This trend was to continue after independence. As the second widest circulating newspaper in Kenya (just under 100,000 copies an issue), *The Standard* was, like *The Nation,* an important political resource during the Moi era. In the Kenyatta era, Udi Gechaga, Kenyatta's son-in-law was the group's chairman. During Moi's reign, *The Standard's* ownership remained an open but guarded secret. The owners were only referred to as "overseas investors". Gideon Moi's (Moi's son) revelations in Andrew Morton's *Moi: the making of an African Statesman* however confirmed the newspaper's ties with the Moi government. The Moi government's almost direct involvement in the editorial position of the newspaper was perhaps most perceptible in 1997 when it impenitently campaigned for the incumbent. At the time, the newspapers majority shareholding was owned by Tiny Rowland's Lohnro, a multi-national company then with vast interests in Kenya and strong ties with the Moi regime. When Lohnro found itself with liquidity problems, a prominent Kanu politician Mark Too became the Group's chairman, but more as proxy for the "ghost investors".

According to an *Africa Watch Report* (1991), the editorial policy of the *Nation* and the *Standard* were strongly tied to safeguarding business interests as well as operating within highly circumscribed political constraints. Because of the fear of losing advertisement revenue or in extreme cases even closure, the newspapers were forced into self-censorship. It is these constraints that made fiction columns a viable alternative for the subversive. Editorial staff was also

vulnerable to the ever-present threat of political reprisal. It is important therefore to note that *Whispers* benefited from an elaborate corporate institutional network thus the work cannot be described as artisanal. This has implications on our understanding of the 'popular' particularly the fact that it can be mainstream and institutionally supported.

Approach and Scope of Study

The author of the column, Wahome Mutahi was interviewed for this project. The interviews provided a useful biographical data for the project as they offered insights into the writer's background and how this informs his work. Dimitriu (2001) has elsewhere noted how a writer is also written by history and the fact that "while the writer gives us the emotional contours of people living amid large historical events, s/he is also written by history which s/he is part of" (13). Mutahi's personal history also partly provides insights into the life of the Kenyan subject since he is a part of that subject. The interviews were also useful in so far as they shed some light on the writer's own position on the issues he introduced for debate in *Whispers.*

To engage critically with *Whispers* requires both a study of the internal logic of the column as well as a reconstruction of the contexts against which the narratives are situated. The study therefore involves close textual reading of the primary text—the column—but with a reconstruction of the non-fictional universe where Mutahi locates these narratives. I therefore examine the text but within particular contexts. Most of my discussions are closely linked to historical developments in Kenya, hence the need to reconstruct the history upon which this work was written. But though *Whispers* is read in context, this is not to suggest that the study privileges history. The synergies between literature and history only help in a critical engagement with the column's concerns.

The column is studied over the period spanning almost all its "life-time" (1983 to 2002), although attention is mainly given to what I regard as significant epochs in its 'making'. By significant epochs I am referring to parallel notable historical developments in Kenya such as the period around the clamour for political pluralism that impacted appreciably on the column. *Whispers* particularly underwent radical transformation in the late 1980s, an issue partly to be explained on the political developments especially the political reform process towards a plural society. Indeed, the column actually only acquires its "memorable" character in the late 1980s through the early 1990s. At inception, in 1983, the column was largely an instruction column almost in the mould of a 'market literature' and it was not until the late 1980s that the writer shifted his narrative framework, conditioned in part by the parallel political developments in the country. In the introductory part of this work however, I briefly engage with the preceding decade to map out the genesis of popular fiction in Kenya and especially popular fiction published in the popular press.

It is also important to look at some form of unity in the stories that I examine, a unity which is only discernible after the late 1980s when Mutahi adopts a new narrative framework where he locates his stories within a fictional Kenyan family. I particularly find useful Forrest Ingram's idea about "patterns of recurrence and development to be the fundamental connective tissues between these stories" (1971: 13). Unity, Ingram notes, is made by establishing such relationships as to create a larger whole without at the same time destroying the identity of the smaller entities (ibid.). To use the words of Dimitriu (2002), the years that I emphasise represent "a unified type of collection which can offer a variety of ideas, moods, scenes, characters, plots while achieving an all-encompassing unity through the readers' awareness of the author's controlling mind behind the tales" (152). In the 1990s, for instance, we find common locales, recurring personages all held together by thematic links that contribute towards

a vision of an overriding purpose located as it were within the narrative framework of the family. Lastly, I take into account the availability of samples of the column. It was difficult to get copies of the early issues of *Whispers* although available samples generally provided a 'taste' of this column in its early days.

Chapter two of this thesis is a literary-(his)torical overview of popular literature in Kenya and the role of the popular press in the emergence and growth of this literature. This chapter maps out the broader historical, intellectual and literary traditions that have attended the 'making' of the Kenyan popular writer. The chapter offers a critical discussion on the emergence and development of popular fiction in Kenya, examining the various traditions that have attended its growth since the 1960s. The chapter also introduces the newspaper column *Whispers*, whose discussion is then spread over the subsequent chapters. It also introduces the writer of the column, Wahome Mutahi briefly examining his other work including some of his novels and theatre productions in an attempt to tease out certain recurring features in his work.

Chapter three offers a critical reading of the characters in the column but more specifically, how the characters are 'bound to discourse'. The chapter notes that most of the column's thematic concerns are discussed primarily through the personal dramas of the characters. Through this discussion, I identify and discuss the writer's use of allegory, the spaces and possibilities this narrative mode creates in the development of the writer's narrative discourse, but also the constraints that emerge as a result of the narrative structure.

Chapter four works on the premise that Mutahi does not write for an anonymous crowd. Instead, he imagines certain publics and uses various strategies to construct these publics. This chapter thus examines how Mutahi anticipates his readership and how he in turn 'constructs' them. I am guided by Bakhtin's (1986)

supposition that the "sense and understanding of the reader, listener, public or people is detectable within the utterance itself…" (98). Audience influence in 'reader construction' is discerned in the various modes and forms of narrative strategies that Mutahi employs. The chapter also attempts a discussion of how the column innovatively dramatises the limits of its genre through an analysis of some of the writer's narrative strategies while simultaneously interrogating why they are deployed and to what end.

Chapter five looks at the Mutahi's appropriation of Christianity in *Whispers*. I argue that Christianity is part of Kenya's popular traditions and that it is in effect a 'popular' realm in which popular concerns can be mapped, discussed and understood by readers. The chapter attempts to show how manifestations of Christian religious experiences in Kenya are characteristic of popular concerns in the country. I also look at the contradictory faces of Christianity in *Whispers*, examining how it empowers subjects but also how it's ability to disempower.

In Chapter six, I look at *Whispers* as a 'political' text, examining how fiction helped Mutahi debate potentially subversive political issues. In the course of this discussion, I examine the relationship between popular culture/fiction and politics. The chapter generally looks at how *Whispers* engages with political issues in Kenya and how, to borrow the words of Street (1997), the column "sheds its pleasures and becomes political practice" (12). While discussing the column as a political text, the chapter also challenges the populism that informs most studies of popular culture, the tendency to valorise the 'popular' as necessarily a form of resistance, instead discussing the multiple, sometimes contradictory narratives within the province of the 'popular'. Chapter seven forms my conclusion where on the basis of the discussions in the preceding chapters, I recapitulate some of the major issues discussed in the thesis.