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

Ogola, George Otieno

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ABSTRACT

Popular fiction columns have been among the most resilient and versatile of the newspaper sub-genres in Kenya. Since the 1970s, these columns have remained a permanent feature in the Kenyan newspapers. Among the most popular of these columns is *Whispers*, a satirical column written by one of Kenya's most talented writers of the 1980s—90s decades, Wahome Mutahi. At a time when the state had all but monopolised public sites of expression in the country, *Whispers* kept the Kenyan popular media porous, opening up spaces for the discussion of social and political issues that could only be 'whispered'. This study gives a detailed discussion of this column against the historical dynamics of post-independence Kenya. I examine how *Whispers* became a public space where Kenya's postcolonial existence, in its many contradictory faces was constantly interrogated. I argue that this column provided its readers certain 'moments of freedom'; it was a site where the limits of social and political taboos were boldly tested. In *Whispers*, people could heartily laugh at authority, and at themselves, but ultimately reflect on the reasons for their laughter. By providing such a space for self-reflection and for the critique of society, I argue that the Kenyan newspaper became an important site of cultural production especially in the 1980s through the 1990s. The introductory parts of this thesis attempt a theorisation of the 'popular' and later trace the emergence of popular fiction as a category of critical literary exegesis in Kenya. I examine the beginnings and growth of popular fiction, focusing mainly on the role of the popular press. The median chapters examine how the Kenyan newspaper provides the space within which popular fiction interfaces with journalism to constitute 'publics', by drawing on popular cultural resources to mediate contemporary and topical issues. The thesis gives a detailed reading of the cultural forms that offer subject populations interpretive frameworks within which to make sense of their world.

The last part of the thesis continues this discussion with an analysis of how the 'popular' mediates questions of power in postcolonial Kenya.