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

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CHAPTER FOUR

The Text and its 'Publics': 'Making' the Audience in *Whispers*

In my Introduction, I argued that through popular culture, certain "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983) are created. I noted that it is in these "communities" that people establish particular identities, upon which they may then act. I therefore argued that as a site that galvanises people around certain 'popular concerns', *Whispers* similarly calls into existence certain 'publics', which, though heterogeneous, are imagined as homogenously accessible. To 'make' these publics, Mutahi employs a number of narrative strategies. The primary focus of this chapter is to explore some of these strategies, and especially to discuss the place of 'publics' in 'texts'. The chapter begins with a reading of 'publics' and how readers are 'sewn' into texts. I seek to establish the centrality of 'publics' in the writing of popular fiction. My discussion then proceeds to examine how Mutahi hails his 'publics', looking at how he imagines, constructs and even manipulates these 'publics'.

This chapter is predicated on the premise that writers do not write to an anonymous public, instead they imagine their 'publics' and define/construct them through various strategies. The chapter thus attempts a discussion of how *publics* are 'inscribed' in *Whispers.* It is important to note at this introductory stage that this is not an attempt at audience research although I still find useful, elements of audience research traditions. It is instructive to note that audience research traditions generally revolve around two main strands of thought. The first one takes audiences as "obedient subjects of texts",[1] while the second posits audiences as active participants in the process of meaning-making. The latter tradition, where I situate this study, argues that "publics and consumers are not

[1] Tiffin (1996) cited in Hofmeyr, 2001: 322. See also Ogola, 2002

simply people waiting out there for something to consume, but on the contrary, they are brought into being as consumers and publics" (Hartley, 1996: 47). The first view, largely attributed to the Frankfurt School of Theodor Ardono and Max Horkheimer argue that the media, for instance, makes audiences "cultural cretins… unable to make any sensible discriminations of value" (cited in Tester, 1994: 59). The Frankfurt School sees the media's relationship with audiences as one way; a monologue. They refer to the audience as a passive mass, not active in and for itself. It is a suggestion that has however been disputed. Indeed, the very process of 'making' audiences cultural cretins itself involves an active engagement of the audience. Tester (1994) thus argues, "activity is required of the audience if the audience is actually to be passive. The audience has to be able to respond to media texts in a way that denies the possibility of a response" (66). A similar argument is made in Voloshinov's influential essay "The Construction of Utterance" (1988) where he explains the "dialogic nature of utterance", he argues that "the utterance looks for his agreement or disagreement, in other words for a critical reception on the part of the listener" (118). Fiske (1987) similarly underscores the dialogic nature of the 'text' arguing that the potential for multiple interpretations of a text such as a television programme suggests that a dialogue exists between the text and audience.

This thesis does not agree with the idea that texts "create obedient subjects", it does nonetheless acknowledge that texts are, to quote Hofmeyr (2001), "imbued with extraordinary powers" (323) and are therefore able to imagine, construct and manipulate audiences.[2] Among the questions that have informed discussions on audiences and texts, and which I am persuaded should be significant to this discussion are posed by Shaun Moores (1994: 256). With little variation, the same questions guide this discussion:

[2] I however want to underscore the validity of Blumer and Gurevitch's (1995) argument that media constitute but one factor in society amongst a host of other influential variables (238).

1. How do media texts construct for their readers particular forms of knowledge and pleasure, making available particular identities and identifications?
2. How do readers' differential social positionings and cultural competencies bear upon their interpretation or decoding of texts?

Moores argues that texts "produce ways of seeing the world and thereby organise consumption in certain ways. They construct the look or gaze of the spectator binding her or him into the fiction and into a position of imagining knowledge" (Ibid.).[3] Hall (1980) demonstrates how "readers are sewn into the text in an ongoing and constantly renewed process" (258). In his illuminating study "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" (1980), Hall argues that texts are encoded with certain meanings although the codes of encoding and decoding "may not be perfectly symmetrical" (131). One explanation for this, to quote Moores (1994) is that texts are all "to some extent polysemic. There are always several possible readings of the text especially at the connotative level of signification – the realm of what Roland Barthes has called 'second-order or associative meanings'" (131). But Hall (1980) also observes that "polysemy must not be confused with pluralism… there exists a pattern of preferred readings" (135). The text is therefore not open to just any kind of reading since "encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings must operate" (ibid.). He calls these parameters "significant clusterings", a strategy we note in *Whispers*.[4]

[3] Related scholarship on this idea can be found in *The Reader in the Text* (1980), a collection of essays edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman.
[4] Useful work supporting this argument has been carried out by Brunsdon (1978).

Owing to its centrality to this study, it is important to give a working definition of the sense in which I use the term 'publics' in this discussion. Quite importantly, one must note that by audiences, I am not referring to "measured markets". To be sure, I am in fact dealing with 'publics', a category that Warner (1996) observes is imaginary yet this is not to suggest that it is unreal. As noted in my introductory chapter, Warner (1996) has defined the public as "never just a congeries of people, never the sum of persons who happen to exist" (51). A public, he explains, always has a way of "organising itself as a body and of being addressed in discourse. Publics are therefore different from persons" (ibid.). Secondly, by acknowledging reading as a discursive practice, I share in Warner's argument that "an individual will sometimes be called into being as an audience, sometimes not" (67).[5] In other words, not all readers even of the same text can be part of the text's audience. This chapter therefore perceives of the audience as a "discursive community" brought into being by the text. In other words, although *Whispers* may be ultimately aimed at *the public* it only constructs *publics*.[6] Against this background, I attempt to analyse how in *Whispers*, audiences are imagined, constructed, even manipulated by the writer. Among the elements that I examine include the use of stereotypical characters, the use of certain modes of address such as 'synthetic personalisation', techniques of understatement, use of 'hidden transcripts' such as rumour and gossip, the deployment of narrative gaps, media templates and the use of a demotic register as the language of the column.

As noted in the introductory chapters of this thesis, at its inception in 1983, *Whispers* read more like an instructive manual relying heavily on stock mannerisms. This placed several constraints on the column's narrative possibilities. I argued that this partly led to the column's transformation, leading to the adoption of a new narrative framework and narrative mode. As already

[5] See also McQuail, 2000.
[6] See also Ogola, 2002

discussed, Mutahi adopted an allegorical narrative framework, deploying an allegorical family and allegorical characters. These characters were to become determinative tropes, discourse markers and social symbols for the column's publics. They acted as points of reference and cognition for audiences. These were characters that readers would relate to, they encoded familiar traits and values, represented familiar conflicts and told stories their readers lived. As discourse markers and social symbols, the characters in *Whispers* were modelled on certain stereotypes. The use of stereotypes, Barber (1997b) remarks, is a way of making models that can be applied to readers' own specific circumstances (357). She further points out that stereotypes act as points where "models of behaviour (representation) become models for behaviour (warnings, advice)…" (ibid.). Other scholars like Bjornson (1990) argue that stereotypical characters reflect the public's assumptions about individual identity more accurately than do heroes in many novels in the canonical tradition (21). Stereotyped characters, to borrow Barber's (2000) conclusions of Yoruba theatre characters, "embody moral messages specifically for spectators of the same gender or occupying the same social role…" (220). The creation of publics is about collectivising experiences and in the column, these stereotypes collectivise experiences, hence publics.

There are two ways in which stereotypes are used in the column. Mutahi employs stereotypes about the Kenyan society in general and the Whispers' household portrayed as their embodiments. But he also uses known 'tribal' stereotypes as yet another way of hailing his publics, while at the same time raising critical social and political issues for discussion. These stereotypes provide a shared archive of Kenya's history hence a very familiar pool of reference. Whispers, Thatcher, 'The Investment' and Whispers Jr are some of the characters deliberately loaded with recognizable stereotypical traits. I have already discussed how Whispers is stereotyped as the quintessential chauvinistic

Kenyan male and can only stress that the character is a caricatural distortion of what is assumed to be a typical Kenyan male. While the portrayal of this character is mirthful, he is a without doubt a character to whom readers can easily identify with. Indeed, according to the writer, there is a trait of Whispers in every Kenyan male.[7] Incidentally, with all his bigoted irreverence, Whispers was among the most popular characters in the column. Bjorson (1990) has argued elsewhere that such representation is not always gratuitous "but serves to rip the veil of respectability from the attitudes that people regard as normal. It challenges people to laugh at it, for if they reflect on the cause of their laughter they will recognise that such assumptions also obtain in the real world" (33). We note Whispers' chauvinistic traits in his relationship with Thatcher. According to Whispers, Thatcher is not supposed to know anything else but how to manage the kitchen just because he paid dowry to her clansmen. He expects Thatcher to nod like a 'lizard in the sun' and never to question any of his decisions. Mutahi gives us the face of male patriarchy in Kenya. The payment of dowry has traditionally made women subordinate in the family. But when this patriarchy is dramatised the way Mutahi does with the character Whispers, he is ripping that veil of respectability that Bjornson talks about. People begin to see the absurdity of these attitudes. Thatcher on the other hand is stereotyped as a matriarch, the female face of the husband she disavows. She is a bold and aggressive woman, on the one hand capable of holding her family together even in the most exacting of situations but on the other, a tyrant. She is the face of the new woman, one who transcends traditional expectations. Although to a certain extent she reveals certain positive values, Mutahi is also keen to use this character to demonstrate another face of the new Kenyan woman. While he recognises her independence, he also reveals her unattractive side, the matriarchal face that is the very face of patriarchy she is so keen to fight. Whispers' daughter, 'The Investment' and Whispers Jr have also been stereotyped as social outlaws. They represent the

[7] Personal interview with Mutahi, February, 2003.

youth in their quest for space in a society that 'refuses to understand them'. As noted earlier, their dressing, language, and interests are all attributes of the modern day rebellious teenager. But 'The Investment', I argued, also signals many prevailing stereotypes in Kenya and with her stereotypical representation, the writer invokes significant socio-cultural realities. Reference to the daughter as an investment, I observed, does not only underline the idea of girls as sources of wealth for their fathers, it also restates the prevalence of this belief of the daughter as a source of wealth among Kenyans. These are character types that readers identify with because they see themselves in the characters. It is a powerful way of hailing publics.

The other way in which stereotypes are used in Whispers to hail publics is to appeal to certain ethnic biases. Mutahi sometimes deliberately loads his characters with known tribal traits. The Luo, for instance, are thus depicted as arrogant, the Kikuyu are described as insatiable especially with regard to money, the Luhya are typified as easily compromised because of their love for food, while the Kisii are renowned for their tempers. Communities living along the Kenyan coast are stereotyped as being very lazy. Odhiambo (2002), argues that in Kenya such stereotypes and tribalism in particular is an everyday experience which people use as a practical vocabulary of politics and social movements (230). These ethnic stereotypes are a part of Kenya's popular traditions capable of hailing publics. Yet, quite apart from being used to hail audiences, they are also used to reflect certain social conflicts in society, a discussion I pursue in Chapter six of the thesis. Stereotypical characters intensify the familiar. This way, not only do readers identify with the characters, they are also drawn to those issues making such distortions necessary. Comments on the use of stereotypes are however varied. Some critics point out that it becomes a problem for those who gain no further knowledge about the group being stereotyped and that potentially damaging assumptions remain intact. Yet others like Barker (1989)

argue quite the opposite. Barker notes that the use of stereotypes is a normal tendency to categorise and that this is how we make sense of our social world. Barker further contends that replacing stereotypes with more positive characterisation, "render invisible the map of social conflict and inequality that stereotypes put up" (207). Similar arguments are made by Taylor, and Willis (1999) who argue that stereotypes "serve to show the distinctions at work in society, acting as indicators about power structures and existing social conflicts" (44). In *Whispers*, stereotypes help define the characters, act as reference points and as points of cognition while at the same time demonstrating certain conflicts within this society, which in the first place necessitates these classifications.

The use of stereotypical characters also means that Mutahi relies heavily on social history, what Green (1997) describes as "subject matter that privileges the average, the ordinary, the everyday…"(10). *Whispers* deals with the commonplace, the everyday dilemmas of the Kenyan subject, which Mutahi uses to mediate and comment on life in modern day Kenya. The weekend escapades of Whispers is a common phenomenon in most urban centres in Kenya. But it is in fact a form of escape for many urbanites, who struggle to cope with the challenges of urban postcolonial existence. These challenges include feelings of emasculation as maledom loses its authority as the seat of centralised power in the family, frustrations of an economy on a perpetual downward spiral; feelings of alienation, and so on. The stereotypical characters tell us these everyday stories and conflicts. Publics are thus brought together through these familiar characters and situations, through an examination of the characters everyday histories, their fears and hopes.

Weaving this fictional universe of *Whispers* into a rational contemporary discourse are the author's styles of narration or and modes of address. One of the most significant of these styles is what Norman Fairclough (1989) calls "synthetic

personalisation". Through this strategy, text and reader are "synthesised in a friendly relationship" (62). The column's public or imagined public, though anonymous, is engaged in debates by personalised references and dialogue. A space is defined in which writer and reader engage in a friendly, sometimes even antagonist, relationship on various issues of common interest. Through this kind of address, both the social and temporal distances are shortened. Talbot (1995) has observed that if an actual reader has a great deal in common with the reader implied in the text, they are likely to take up points comfortably. But if the distance—social and temporal—increases between the two, so does the negotiation. Mutahi therefore attempts to shorten the social and temporal space through this style of narration. This 'personalisation' can also be discerned in the narrative voices adopted by the writer. In the column, although the writer tells his stories in the first person voice, he often shifts to the oral narrative mode, inviting his readers to a 'dialogue, hence creating familiarity and personalising the relationship. In an excerpt demonstrative of this style, Mutahi writes:

> …[D]id I hear someone say, "Thank God the bore is gone? Did I hear someone say, Please Whis don't go… (*Sunday Nation*, April 1, 2002).

The writer merely imagines a response and actually impresses upon the readership to respond. He imagines communication as a dialogic process of meaning-making. Equally significant is the fact that the writer also intimates story telling is a weaving process that involves both narrator and the audience (Ogude, 1999: 56). But one also notes the element of understatement in the example and in the column as a whole. Why does he, for instance, call himself a bore? In various other instances, he calls his column a third-rate column and refers to his readers as 'readers of the third-rate column'. Meanwhile, he often says he is "neither too clever nor too wise". His brains are "reconditioned goat brains". Mutahi 'downgrades' in order to elicit participation. Through this kind

of understatement the writer and reader create a shared space of and for the 'ordinary'. But the subtexts of these understatements are powerful commentaries on very profound issues.

It is also interesting to note that although the column employs the first-person narrative voice, the writer equally assumes the narrative powers of an omniscient narrator—the third-person narrator. Mutahi combines first-person telling and third-person observation. Knowledge is gained through introspection and information by reportage. His use of the third-person is essentially to maintain control of the narrative's point of view. The use of the third-person is an attempt to also dominate the subject. I noted in my Chapter Two that there are elements of New Journalism in Mutahi's work, a style in which dominating the subject in the first-person voice becomes difficult. The occasional use of the third-person gives the writer some control. The writer engages the audience and calls for its involvement in the process of meaning-making, even as he takes and defends certain positions.

Mutahi also makes use of 'narrative gaps' or silences as a strategy to construct his publics. The taciturn, almost report-like style of the column restricts internal monologues but creates appropriate silences in the narratives. The reader is asked to read 'diacritically' across these silences. The targeted audience is therefore actively involved in the narrative. Through the creation of these deliberate silences, a public that shares in the experiences being narrated is imagined by the writer. The reader is forced to actively engage with the text's "unconscious". We can also argue that through this strategy, the writer exploits the element of dramatic irony in which both the author and audience share knowledge of the subject. Similarly, the element of ambiguity that is very much a part of this column finds a vent in the strategy. For instance, Mutahi barely mentioned former President Daniel arap Moi by name in the column. Instead,

Moi was simply the "man who was born and brought up in Sacho". Kenyan readers share in the knowledge of Moi's birthplace, Sacho, a rural outpost in the depths of the Rift Valley. This kind of description served several purposes. First, it underlined the ordinariness of the former president, undermining his elevated status as *mtukufu* (His Eminence) and making readers engage with him on a more ordinary level. This displacement of authority onto the narrative space allows both the reader and the writer to "finger, touch, ridicule and laugh" at authority as Bakhtin (1981: 23) would have it. An interesting comparison can be taken from Scott's (1990) discussion of "concealment" in the dramatisation of power. Scott gives the examples of Genet's *The Screens*, set in Algeria in which labourers "kill their European overseer when his Arab maid discovers he has used padding on his stomach and buttocks to make an imposing appearance. Once he is reduced to ordinary proportions, they are no longer intimidated" (50). Scott argues that "by controlling the public stage, the dominant can create an appearance that approximates what, ideally, they would want the subordinates to see. The deception—or propaganda—they devise may add padding to their stature but it will also hide whatever might detract from their grandeur and authority" (ibid.). There are also times when Mutahi would merely use certain phrases that had become part of Moi's vocabulary and which he knew his readers could easily recognise. For instance, he would use the phrase "my friends, nobody likes the black man. The white man is dangerous" (*Sunday Nation,* May 14, 2000). Quite often, whenever he was under attack from the international community, Moi would always play the race card to appeal to racial sympathies. He would claim such attacks were racially motivated and remind Kenyans of their 'blackness'.

Below is another illustrative excerpt of some of the instances of the silences we are referring to:

> There are certain enemies of peace, love and unity led by one Castro son of Aringo, who have been saying seditious things recently. He is the same man who one day looked at the man who was born and brought up in Sacho and instead of seeing a man of flesh and blood, he saw Jesus Christ. So he said things to the effect that the man from Sacho was the prince of peace…. (*Sunday Nation*, May 13, 2001).

The text assumes certain shared knowledges between the writer and his readers. 'Peace, love and unity' was Moi's (in)famous political slogan, widely diffused to populate the public space in an attempt to legitimate his power. Odhiambo (1997), argues after Sklar (1983), that for the most part of its post-independence history, Kenya has been "a guided democracy, a situation in which the ruling regime knows what is in the best interests of the citizenry" (188). Odhiambo further argues that in Kenya, "the instrumentality for depoliticisation has been the state while its justifying ideology has been order" (ibid.). Through political slogans such as Moi's 'Peace, Love and Unity', dissent was not tolerated ostensibly for the 'good of society'. Yet, one sees this argument as one contrived by the state to justify its hegemony. In the example given, Mutahi deliberately subverts and ridicules the usage of this political slogan. Indeed by 2001, enemies of the Moi regime were considered politically progressive' by the country's underclass following years of political repression. Secondly, Kenyan newspaper readerships remember Aringo whose pet name was Castro, as one of the most eloquent ministers of the Moi regime. More importantly however, Aringo also gained notoriety as one of the most sycophantic of Moi's ministers. In a famous speech where he virulently castigated the opposition for their criticism of the regime, he called the immediate former president "the Prince of Peace", words the Christian faithful use while referring to Jesus Christ. Aringo's speech was particularly significant and necessarily amplified not only for this comparison of man and God but also for the fact that it came at a time when various parts of the

country were engulfed in ethnic turmoil for reasons attributable in part to the policies of Moi's government. Mutahi dramatises the absurd and his satirical representation of Moi and Aringo is parodied in a manner that suggests an indictment of this polity. The expression of the political in religious imagery also indicates that the interlocutors are assumed to be familiar with the worlds of both religion and politics. Haugerud (1995) captures the preponderance of such examples in Kenya in the late 1980s through the early 1990s thus:

> [i]ndirect messages float between orators and hearers, speakers manoeuvre within constraints of what is and is not publicly speakable… Listeners know their own references, construct their own interpretation … a philosophical tale of winks and shrinks (1-2).

It is however equally important to note the influence of the medium of the newspaper on the column. Constrained by space, the use of narrative gaps become necessary as the writer does not have the kind of space found in other literary forms such as the novel to express himself in more detail. This certainly has consequences on the way he writes hence the need for certain narrative gaps.

Closely linked to the previous discussion is Mutahi's use of rumour in the column or the use of 'whispering' as a narrative technique. I have already noted that the period in which *Whispers* was written was highly repressive with the government monopolising public sites for expression while criminalizing organised opposition. I have thus argued that it for this reason that many Kenyans turned to what Scott (1990) has called 'hidden transcripts', as trusted sites of legitimate discourse. Rumour and gossip are some of the 'hidden transcripts' extensively utilised in the column. I noted how Scott outlines ways in which we can read these transcripts; as forms of protest which dare not speak in their own name, as safe social sanctions especially when social rules have been

violated but also a site for group problem solving. Gossip and rumour reinforce normative standards of behaviour so that those who deviate from these standards are mocked or despised. As a site that provides space for group problem solving, a public is easily constituted around a rumour. Ramotsu Shibutani argues that rumour develops as "people caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct meaningful interpretation of it [the situation] by pooling their intellectual resources" (cited in Rosnow and Fine 1976: 97).

Usually, the presence of leaders and other higher status of individuals help build publics around rumour. Rumours are also juxtaposed with hard news, a strategy which Rosnow and Fine argue is used to give rumour "credibility by association" (97). In Kenya, 'hidden transcripts' and especially rumour played a very specific political role. Haugerud (1997) and Odhiambo (1987) have separately discussed how rumour became one of the most trusted vehicles of legitimate discourse in Kenya during the Moi regime. With numerous legal and institutional impediments to free speech, rumour provided an alternative way in which Kenyans processed reality. Many potentially subversive statements thus hide under Mutahi's popular phrase "it was whispered to me". Apart from being a cue to the fact that what officialdom denies may not necessarily be untrue, publics are constructed around these rumours. Below are a few examples.

Dr. Richard Leakey, a world-renowned archaeologist was at one time widely regarded as a potential presidential candidate in Kenya. The Moi administration did not take this kindly and unleashed its machinery on Leakey who had fallen out with Moi despite having been Head of Civil Service in Moi's government, one of the most powerful positions in the public service in Kenya. Apart from being physically assaulted, the state was said to have circulated rumours to discredit Leakey's possible candidacy. The narrator in *Whispers* comments:

> [t]here is a man in a lot of trouble because some people say that he wants to be *juu juu zaidi* [Trans: Kiswahili for "high up" but used here as a satirical reference to Moi. This was famous chant that was often 'perfomed' to announce his arrival]—that is the main headmaster of this country. Now that they don't want him to be worker number one and farmer number one, they have remembered many things about him. They are saying that a man who goes to London to have his legs aligned and balanced just like the wheels of a car, cannot be the main headmaster of this country… (*Sunday Nation*, June 11, 1995).

Leakey had just been involved in a plane crash which he survived but lost both his legs. He had therefore been regularly going to London for treatment. In the column, the narrator's description leaves no doubt as to the man being described. References to his supposed intentions to be the "main headmaster" in the country equally leaves little doubt as to who the antagonist in this case is, for readers are aware of the various names Mutahi used to describe Moi. Besides, chants such as *Juu Juu Zaidi* were part of the rhetoric that Moi administration used to enhance his stature as a powerful leader. In another example, the narrator talks about the rumours that Moi would be offered a hefty pension or a 'golden handshake' as it became popularly known following the retrenchment in the civil service forced on most Third World countries by the IMF and the World Bank. Again, the narrator introduces certain issues as 'whispers'.

> [i]f the sun does not suddenly start rising in the West, the man who was born and brought up in Sacho and who has been the main headmaster in this country will be handed a golden handshake come year 2000. I hear whispers it will be a major handshake. However, I wish he could receive

> the same baby handshake that other characters who are being retrenched are getting… (*Sunday Nation*, August 13, 2000).

Satirising the habit of government ministers always rushing to see off the president whenever he is leaving the country for overseas trips, the narrator dramatises the absurdity of this practice using an example on one typical case:

> [t]here are whispers that when the undisclosed people heard where the boss was, they abandoned their tea without paying their bills and did a Wakiihuri and Kamanthi to where *Baba wa Taifa* (Father of the Nation) was.[8] There are whispers that one of the most senior ones was seen carrying the red carpet meant for the boss towards him and mumbling things to the effect that the carpet walked away on its own and should have been there from the very beginning. The said characters then lined up like schoolboys and wore smiles that said they had proper report forms ready for inspection by the headmaster before he left for the land of frog-eaters (France). After boarding the plane, I hear they waved at it until it reached Addis Ababa. I hear that some of them stayed behind fearing that Baba Moi might return and find no one waiting to show him the way back to State House (*Sunday Nation*, August 20, 2000).

Related to the above discussion is the creation of an interface between journalism and fiction writing, the merging of fact and fiction or the ridiculous with the ordinary. As noted in my Introduction, these merge into a powerful hyperbole, which the audience is then forced to confront. These are issues that people could not ordinarily talk about but once placed in the narrative space, they are able to confront them.

[8] Wakiihuri and Kamanthi are popular Kenyan athletes who had at the time won medals at the Olympic Games.

Significant in the column's consolidation of publics is also the attempt to construct narratives that draw on a familiar past through which is created an imagined common space brought forth through shared histories and experiences. It is not unusual that most of the column's themes find their thematic antecedents and parallels in the Kenyan past and that of the column's characters. To draw these parallels, Mutahi, like Ngugi in *Petals of Blood* and *A Grain of Wheat*, to use Ogude's (1999) words, "explores a specific time scheme in which the narrative swings from the past time of action to the current time of telling or retelling. In each of the two time zones, the experiences of the past are in themselves a parallel and a commentary on the present situation" (52-53). The circulating discourses that populate the column are often manipulated to echo familiar past experiences which then act as constituents of narrative meaning in present situations. The allusions create a shared field of reference between writer and audience. Below is a typical example of this strategy:

> [c]ome this Wednesday and I am supposed to go insane. I am supposed to go insane by going to a shop to buy a bunch of weeds in the name of flowers and in the name of a character called Valentine. Valentine is not a member of my Nyaituga clan but all the same I am supposed to buy those wild things in his name and hand them over to Thatcher.
>
> I am supposed to dress in red as if I am a Kanu youth winger. After that I am expected to hold those wild things in one hand, go down on one knee and tell Thatcher that I love her more than the frothy stuff that I drink at the right price and temperature. I am supposed to tell her that if she cuts my veins, she will not find blood. Instead, she will find my love for her flowing in them like River Chania during floods… When we first met, wild leaves in the name of flowers were not part of saying that love was flowing in

> your vein like River Nyando during floods. There were ways of doing so. One of them was proving to your potential Thatcher you were not a coward. Proving that you were not a coward involved many things. One of them was taking her to the village dance at the local K One, our village Choices. Our K One and Choices[9] were places where we hang out once in a while to dance to the tunes of the time.
>
> In those days, we did not have musicians barking like dogs in the name of music. Instead, they played twist. They did not sing songs to make your mother in law shut her ears as it happens these days in the name of a character called Shaggy. They sang songs that advised young men to marry otherwise they would spend all their lives sharing food with cockroaches… (*Sunday Nation*, February 11, 2001).

The excerpt above uses the narrative of romance, particularly the notion of Valentine in a relatively modern Kenya to compare two different epochs, an unidentified but very familiar past, and the present. By 'presencing the past' (Masolo, 2000), the column subtly attacks modern society's very liberal acceptance of the 'Valentine phenomenon', one of the many new lifestyles that Mutahi debates. But there are other micro-narratives weaved in the same column. For instance, the red colour associated with Valentine is equated to the red uniform of the Kanu youth wingers, henchmen of the Kanu regime during the Moi era. Even in such apparently innocuous tropes such as romance, the writer is still able to explore political issues. Equally significant are the hints at two generations through the description of the music included in the excerpt. According to the narrator, contemporary musicians "bark like dogs". The narrator takes a swipe at Shaggy, the popular American-based Jamaican ragga artist accusing him of singing songs that would make "your mother-in-law shut

[9] *K One*, *K Two* and *Choices* are popular nightclubs in Nairobi.

her ears". Evidently, this discussion is used to augment some of the writer's major thematic concerns such as the tensions between traditional and modern lifestyles. This excerpt is suggestive of the past as offering a 'solution' to confront the challenges emerging in the present. This past provides an important 'clustering' upon which decoding of the narrative is done.

In my Introduction, I linked Mutahi with an emerging sector of political reformers in the country in the early 1990s. One of the most significant characteristics of this "reform movement", I argued, was its 'backward glance', its reliance on memory to construct fairly disparate groups into a homogenous entity. Jean Pierre Vernant notes that memory "creates the unity to ensure that a heterogeneous organism has an identity at all" (cited in Terdiman, 1993: 108). Collective memory of the past, especially drawn from the struggle years in Kenya became increasingly important to the reform agenda and is generously appropriated in the column. As Terdiman (1993) observes, dominance and subjecthood are both sustained by memory, but "a selective highly ideologised form of recollection that brackets fully as much as it restores" (20). For instance, in Kenya, the Moi regime, fostered political nostalgia as part of its moral armament to legitimate its rule. Werbner (1998) argues that the "cultural past, socio-political traditions and the colonial struggle were and are deliberately fetishised…" (5). The subject population on the other hand equally makes this past a fetish upon which to lay claim on the present. It provides them a form of identity. As Terdiman explains, though memory sustains hegemony, it also subverts it through its capacity to recollect and to restore the alternative discourses that the dominant would simply bleach out and forget. In times of crises therefore counter-discourses to a large extent employ only that memory that subverts dominance. The privilege of counter-discourses, Terdiman notes, is "the obverse of their limitation. Because they have not yet become triumphant or transparent, they have an analytic power and a capacity to restitute perception

and comprehension that their dominant antagonists cannot exhibit" (20). It is in this sense that socio-political and cultural traditions are used in *Whispers;* to give voice to suppressed histories as a counter discourse to domination. *Whispers* manifests a predilection towards these histories, which are exploited because of their capacity to critique and confront power and other forms of dominance. In *Whispers* therefore the past is deliberately if selectively remembered as part of the column's 'grammar of resistance'. The past is appropriated through what Green (1997) describes as 'conversational remembering', which is "the use of the past as a discursive resource intended to persuade and engage the interlocutors" (24). In most of these stories, memory signifies loss, which manifests itself in feelings of betrayal. This is used as a strategy to coalesce readers around feelings of failure that help manufacture forms of dissent. In such times, to use Terdiman's words, "memory recollects and restores. Its representations promise conservation and continuity in the face of time's entropic drift" (35). A good reference here would be the appeal to struggle idioms repeatedly used in the column such as *Nilipigania*, *Nilipigania na jasho* (I fought for, I fought for this (freedom) with my sweat). These idioms locate the reader within a familiar past. More specifically, it locates the reader within a community of the oppressed. The past thus gives meaning to the present while at the same time helping the writer construct a public on the basis of their position as a repressed community.

In the previous chapters, I discussed Mutahi's use of 'media templates'. As I indicated earlier, these templates are instrumental in shaping narratives and publics around particular social problems. The retrospective references help define and consolidate publics. While the referents might exclude others, they also form in-groups through common histories and experiences. To demonstrate this point, a reading of *Whispers* in 1992 offers some notable examples.

At the height of the clamour for multi-party democracy in Kenya in 1992, the discourse of democracy in the country revolved around the repeal of Section 2A of the Kenyan Constitution. This section of the constitution had made Kenya a *de jure* one party-state and precipitated the crackdown on perceived political dissidents. Democratic rule in Kenya was popularly seen to depend on the repeal of this section of the constitution. The need for a constitutional amendment was debated for a great part of the year and became a major referential point of interest in the discussion of the country's social and political history. Section 2A and the attendant discourses on democracy were quickly appropriated into common speech. In several issues of the column published in 1992 when the section was finally repealed, Whispers the eponymous character talks of "liberating his wallet from Section 2A of the cash economy". He talks of wanting to make his wallet a "multi-currency notes affair". He also says he wants to make his wallet "experience freedom of association and assembly". These are expressions directly appropriated from the arguments that led to and followed the repeal of Section 2A of the Kenyan Constitution. The constitutional amendment was symbolic of freedom and therefore was regarded of redeeming historical interest. It signalled the ushering in of several concomitants of democracy such as freedom of speech, of association and freedom of assembly. We might in fact borrow from Young's (1993) very insightful observation cited in Haugerud (1995) that such notions invested with a sense of legitimacy such as 'democracy' can be used to legitimise certain demands (17). Publics easily relate to such media templates, sometimes because they are stakeholders in the political process, other times because these templates help them make sense of their immediate concerns.

I also discussed the salience of the 'Beijing narrative' in the column, which I argued descends from the famous Beijing Women's Conference held in China in 1995. Because of its visibility in the media and the debates around it, the

conference soon became a media template upon which issues around gender relations could be discussed. Whenever Beijing was mentioned, it was cue to particular publics. Other examples draw on moments of political turmoil such as the ethnic clashes that had sporadically erupted in various parts of the country since the introduction of political pluralism. There were also templates that drew on the various political assassinations that have marked Kenya's post-independence history. Instances of grand corruption such as the infamous 'Goldenberg' scandal also became a rhetorical shorthand for infamy. The media templates generally draw on the "spectacular", events that for various reasons have attracted and sustained media and public attention.

Finally, I want to reflect on the language used in *Whispers,* arguably among the most notable characteristics of the column. While a look at the language might of necessity involve a re-reading of the debates on the language question in African literature, it is a debate I will deliberately avoid and only focus on its more relevant strands. The crux of the discussion here revolves more around the demotic register used in *Whispers* and how it allows the building up of a diverse yet composite public.

In Kenya, writers of popular fiction have tended to use an intelligible language which is only just English but which in fact represent popular speech patterns in the country. Mutahi's column reflects the extent of linguistic hybridisation in the country. In a very significant way, it helps him out of the 'language problem'. Indigenisation of the English language in *Whispers* involves more than just having a sprinkling of local words, phrases or proverbs in the English language. It also involves decentering the very heart of the language —its structure. In *Whispers* is a demotic register that is able to represent local realities and, to borrow the words of Zabus (1991), represent the contesting worlds of which they are a part (4).

An important issue in understanding the process of indigenisation in Anglophone literatures is the idea of polyglottism, which Zabus describes as the result of a "social situation". The Kenyan writer, like most writers in West Africa, is "a polyglottous writer writing in a situation of acute diglossia in a multi-lingual state".[9] In such a situation, Zabus notes, referring in his case to West Africa although we note a similar trait in East Africa, the language of literature produced will be the result of "the interplay of linguistic codes or registers in the social arena or a literary aesthetic medium that bears no relation to the current uses of the European language in the social arena or both" (16). The culture contacts in Kenya and the resultant social situation is such that a demotic register has been developed that is intelligible to a diverse yet composite public. Although *Whispers* is written in English, it gravitates towards this demotic register. The column thus reflects prevailing popular forms of speech. The writing undermines the dominant practices in fiction by reworking and subverting grammatical conventions of the English language. But this register also socially constructs a particular group. The use of a demotic register in *Whispers* should thus be understood as aesthetic and ideological in both character and intent. It does not merely reflect popular speech patterns, it also makes very specific interventions in the column's narrative discourse. Apart from confirming Stephen Slemon's (1989) idea about the "post colonial text advancing its own oppositional reading of English cultural imperialism… within the rhetorical or tropological apparatus of its figurative language itself",[10] the language is also a way of asserting difference. This language 'imagines a community' —readers of the third-rate column. Bourdieu (1977) argues that the "constitutive power which is given ordinary language lies not in the language itself but in the group which authorises it and invests it with authority" (21). The ordinary language in

[9] The phrase is borrowed from Zabus (1991: 16)
[10] Page unknown to this researcher.

Whispers is invested with authority by the repressed majority operating from the margins.

The language in *Whispers* contains instances of linguistic code-switching and code-mixing, reflecting a case of both diglossia and polyglottism. A particular public is created, that which is interpellated not by English but by a 'Kenyanness' able to operate mixed codes. Below is a good example:

> I fear that my Investment, alias Pajero and the sister to the domestic thug called Whispers Junior, will come over to me and say, "*Buda, chota chapaa za kutosha si I am sure you know I need you know I need a ka-tumbo cut that is major.* [Trans: Father give me enough money, don't you know I need that top] How do you expect me to pass my degree if my lecturers don't see most of my geography? ... *Faza, koma kulalia chapaa. Chomoa zingine"* (Trans: Father, stop being mean with your money. Give me some more…) (*Sunday Nation*, January 16, 2002).[11]

Three languages are in use in the excerpt, namely Kiswahili, English and *Sheng'*. The language attributed to 'The Investment', commonly referred to as *Sheng*, has a mix of English, Kiswahili and a motley other Kenyan ethnic languages. *Sheng'* mutates quite regularly and although associated with the youth, it is increasingly becoming definitive of a polyglot Kenyan nation. Chege Githiora (2002) has argued that in such instances, language has a particular functional role. It "empowers a certain group of speakers by providing a 'closed' in-group means of communication. In this way it also acts as a means of establishing group identity, expressing solidarity and creating prestige among insiders" (174). Critics like Roger Kurtz (1998) have similarly attempted to theorise code-

[11] This article was written as a commentary when it emerged that a number of male university lecturers were asking for sexual favours from their students to let them pass in their examinations.

switching and code-mixing. Kurtz argues that the use of code-switching in fiction is necessitated by a number of circumstantial factors, including: cases of topical shifts, especially where the speaker is more comfortable discussing in a given language; an aside comment made for a listener other than a primary addressee; the arrival of a participant whom the speaker wants to include or exclude or shifting attention to a new listener (cited in Newell, 2002: 125). These ideas fairly represent the use of this mode of address in *Whispers* where the writer uses different registers to gesture at the different persons in conversation with themselves and with others. It is also through these registers that one gets a sense of who these stories represent and who they are talking to.

But one must also note that over the years, Mutahi also developed his own comic idiom through which he defined his readership. He uniquely restructured the English grammar, adding to it several of his own coinages and dramatised certain forms of popular speech to dramatise certain experiences. He willed both language and idioms into being and invited his publics to travel along with him. Indeed, in one of the comments published following his death, a leading columnist in the *Sunday Standard*, Maina Muiruri noted the "lively imagination of language" in *Whispers* as one of the column's most engrossing features. As discussed elsewhere in the thesis, former President Daniel Arap Moi became "the man from Sacho", the "main headmaster", "Uncle Dan", *Jogoo* (cock), *Mtukufu Baba* (His Eminence Father) among other titles. Whispers, the writer's alter ego in the column was 'Son of the Soil', 'Man from the Slopes of Mount Kenya', 'Man Whis', 'Whispero' and 'Son of Nyaituga'. Meanwhile, the character's legs resembled "the arrow root tubers on which I was fed by Appepklonia (his mother)". Beer, for which Whispers was legendary, was referred to as "Ruaraka waters, Kanywaji, Kiereini liquids, Hobsonian waters, and Jeremiah's liquids" (Jeremiah Kiereini and Hobson were at different times Managing Directors of the Kenya Breweries Ltd). To die was to "become past tense"; the naked body

became "one's geography"; a girl was a "skirt wearer", while anything "serious" was something "major" and Whispers's car was "Whispermobile". Meanwhile, Rhoda, the bar maid was so good at her job she could take a single order of "four Tuskers, three of those cold, two Pilsners, one warm, three green ones—Citizen, four Embassy sticks, one SM and a match box" and deliver with correct change without missing an item. Below are samples of the 'familiar' sentences that became a part of the column:

> Thatcher opened the door and I thought I could see her last molar, the way I used to see it in those days when her body did not protest at being dressed in a mini skirt and when I wore such high platform shoes I looked as if I was walking on nine by nine concrete blocks.

Once on a trip on one of Nairobi's pot-holed roads, Whispers describes the rickety state of his car and the state of the roads in Kenya thus:

> [t]he Whispermobile, with its distinguished cargo of Baba and Mama Investment, waded deeper into Lake Juja Road and I thought I heard something like a belch as if the car was protesting it had drunk more water than the Kiereini liquids in my stomach.

Writing about Valentine's day, the character Whispers complains:

> I do not know whose brother a fellow called Valentine is. I do not even know if he is a man or woman. I have no idea if this Valentine is real or a clone. I do not know whether he is a Maragoli or a goat trader from Mogotio. All I know is that come February, he makes me see red. I see red because my Thatcher seems to know quite a bit about this Valentine fellow and come the beginning of February, there is no other talk except about

him. It begins to seem as if he is the one who took a beehive full of breathing bees to Thatcher's clan (Examples cited from *Sunday Standard*, 27 July, 2003).

After attending a funeral of a friend, the narrator describes the friend's death as follows:

> [t]o cut a long story short, the deceased put so much frothy stuff into his alimentary canal that by eight in the night, he could not tell the difference between day and night. He actually could not tell between his left and right leg. So as he was driving home, the car he was driving did a major dance and argued with a lamppost. The lamppost won the argument and the man we are burying lost it (*Sunday Nation*, March 14, 1999).

Once cornered by Nairobi's teeming thugs, the narrator describes how one of the thugs threatened to kill him:

> *Mzee, chota ama tukupe visa ya kwenda kwa* Sir God! [Trans: Old man, give us your money or we give you a visa to see God!] (*Sunday Nation*, March 10, 2002)

While contributing to the comic effect of the column, this kind of language intensifies some of the issues being discussed and at the same time helps define the column's publics.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate how publics are "sewn into the text" and thus how *Whispers* constructs its publics. The discussion was premised on the argument that audiences are not just out there, anonymous and structureless,

but that they are in fact constructed by the text. The discussion has attempted to show how diverse publics are accessed as a composite entity through the column's generic features. I examined how Mutahi draws on a pool of familiar resources to construct his publics. Among the major issues this chapter reveals is that Mutahi takes into account the contexts of the column's production, the social situations he is explaining and the cultural positioning of his readers and then wills into being certain generic characteristics that will help him bring certain publics into being.