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

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CHAPTER TWO

Popular Fiction and the Popular Press in Kenya

This chapter explores the emergence and growth of popular fiction in Kenya while examining the role of the popular press in this development. The chapter begins with a discussion of the roles played by the Universities of Nairobi, Makerere and Ibadan in the development of African literature. The chapter then looks at the emergence of popular literature as a category of critical literary exegesis in the early 1970s with the rise of writers such as David Maillu and Charles Mangua. The discussion then focuses on the popular press as a space for apprenticeship for a number of these writers, and the emergence of popular fiction columns in the Kenyan popular press. I examine two representative samples, *Joe* and *Drum* magazines, arguably some of the most influential popular magazines in Kenya in the 1970s. I then locate *Whispers* within these traditions and give a brief overview of the column as an introduction to more detailed analysis. The chapter ends with a biography of Wahome Mutahi where I also examine his interests in the novel and theatre while teasing out some of the recurring features in his literary work in general.

In 1968, a group of university lecturers, among them Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Taban Lo Liyong, Owuor Anyumba and Okot p' Bitek, from the University of Nairobi called for the transformation of the university's English department. The lecturers argued that there was a need for an "African narrative" to replace a syllabus they perceived as too European in orientation. They emphasised the need for a cultural reinvention and revival of Africa's cultural past to help address some of the emerging challenges in independent Kenya (Odhiambo,T, 2004). This move, coupled at the time with the government's desire to establish a cultural policy in the country was a defining moment in both the intellectual and literary traditions in Kenya. The Kenyan government

was keen on establishing a cultural policy that would go hand in hand with its development programmes (Ogot, 1995). Accordingly, it established and promoted institutions such as the Kenya Cultural Centre, the Kenya Literature Bureau and later even created The Ministry for Culture and Social Services (Odhiambo, T, 2004). These institutions would celebrate Kenya's cultural heritage but in a manner that was in fact intended to emphasise the need for 'unity' in post-independence Kenya, then a part of the government's larger hegemonic project. Odhiambo (1987) argues that

> regimes that took over state power at independence were bound, at the beginning at least, to be responsive to the forces generated by the various peasantries that, presumably, were articulated at the level of contradictions which the state system and not in harmony with it, since peasants are guardians of their autonomy and therefore duty-bound to be wary of the state system. The state then had no choice but to create political structures capable of containing the divisive effects of these contradictions (191).

This argument may very well help us understand the Kenya government's desire to establish a cultural policy in the country, indeed a policy that was later rejected by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, among other writers (See Ngugi, 1993; 1981).

Apart from the University of Nairobi, Makerere University also played a significant role in the development of African literature in the region. Scholars such as Simon Gikandi (2003) have underscored the influence of Makerere University in East Africa's intellectual literary traditions especially in the nascent years of the Kenyan novel. Makerere had helped create a small but hugely influential literary elite in the region. This literary elite was heavily influenced by F. R Leavis' 'Great Tradition' so that many pioneering works of writers in the region emerge from this tradition. Indeed, writers such as

Ngugi wa Thiong'o have acknowledged the extent to which they were influenced by Western writers such as D.H Lawrence and Joseph Conrad, among others. Gikandi (2003) observes that it was from the 'Great Tradition' that East Africa's pioneer writers first got their real literary models of what a poem, a novel or a play was.

Towards the end of the Sixties decade through the early 1970s, there was a deliberate attempt by most of these writers to break away from the imprisoning tethers of English writing traditions. This shift partly gestured towards the region's oral traditions. Writers such as Ngugi began infusing in their work local oral traditions in search of an African literary aesthetic. But it was Okot p'Bitek who almost single-handedly took this new form to a new level, particularly revolutionising the use of the English language in the region's literature with his poetry/songs *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. Writers emerging in the early to mid 1970s pushed the limits of this 'literary revolution to the extreme. Charles Mangua and David Maillu not only introduced a new literature directly sourcing its register and temper from its readership, they also moved away from the highly ideological writing of the 1960s, instead interrogating more immediate social issues that had been pushed to the periphery by the 1960s writers.

It is important however that one also looks at the several intellectual and cultural magazines that were part of this "literary revolution". *Black Orpheus* and *Transition*[1] were influential African literary magazines linked to Makerere University in Uganda (*Transition*) and University of Ibadan in Nigeria (*Black Orpheus*) and played a significant role in the emergence of a new African narrative. *Ulli Beir* edited *Black Orpheus* while Rajat Neogy published *Transition*. These two journals encouraged the development of an African

[1] Examples of other cultural and intellectual magazines that also promoted the growth of African literature included *Busara* in Kenya, Nat Nakasa and Lewis Nkosi's *The Classic* in South Africa, *Okyeane* by Ghana Society of Writers, *Nigerian Magazine* among others. Earlier on there was the influential Parisian cultural review *Presence Africaine* of Alione Diop although this mainly featured Negritude writers (Benson, 1986).

literature that was markedly different from its earlier European references. John Thompson thus says of Ulli Beir of *Black Orpheus*:

> He… operated in a special field. He was a border operator—on the border between the European and the local, the traditional. And he could cross back and forth from one border to another and find things they had in common. Ulli was able to go back and forth like a smuggler… from avant-garde European art and avant-garde European literature, which at the time were still interested in myth and symbol, to modern traditional African art and literature. Thus seemed like a common meeting ground. For a time just as it had been in Europe, this was a tremendous fertile field for painters and writers (cited in Benson, 1986: 17).

Neogy's *Transition* also attempted these "border operations". According to Benson (1986), *Transition's* first issues were "egregiously arty, bohemian, meant to challenge conventional sensibilities" but also provided "a medium for the editors' own feelings of alienation" (107). Clearly, although these two magazines were both interested in a new African literary aesthetic, their intellectual leanings meant that popular literature was still significantly muted in their pages. Several contributions from outside the academy barely made the pages of the magazines although a few emerging writers were published. Benson (1986) has noted that there was a "deliberate effort to reserve domination of the new African literature for a group of writers…" (10). Similarly, commenting on *Transition*, Abiola Irele notes, "one sensed the pull towards a restricted university periodical that the Makerere lecturers, thrilled with the appearance of an intellectual magazine at their doorstep, were exerting on those early numbers" (103).[2] While it is important that we acknowledge the role played by these magazines in the development of African literature, we should at the same time take of the fact that they

[2] *Journal of African Studies* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1967) pg 444 (cited in Benson, 1986: 113).

created a small intellectual elite who excluded the popular fiction writer. Benson thus notes that instead of nurturing new talent, it was Rajat Neogy, Gerald Moore, Jahnheinz Jahn, Wole Soyinka, Abiola Irele, Ali Mazrui, Es'Kia Mphalele, Paul Theroux, and Christopher Okigbo who dominated the pages of *Transition.* Neogy's taste for the avant-garde literature, Benson argues, was curiously selective. Beier was not any different. Although he gave space to emerging literatures such as the widely popular Onitsha Market literature, he is said to have been interested in this literature mainly for anthropological reasons—"its vast reservoir of untrained but creative talent" (Benson, 1986: 54).

In effect then, although *Transition* published new writers from East Africa, it cannot be credited with having produced the region's 'popular' writer. The 'popular' writer in Kenya was therefore neither directly fathered by the university nor mothered by the elite cultural magazines such as *Transition*, he was, in my opinion, the bastard child of a literary revolution.

By the early 1970s, a number of local publishers had warmed up to popular literature having realised that there was a market for this kind of work. The rapid growth of urban centres such as Nairobi had created a modest but vibrant working class that was not only literate but also had disposable income. Urbanisation had intensified social problems and this group found popular literature capable of responding to their popular concerns besides being a source of leisure. With a ready market for the literature, multinational publishers launched local imprints to produce work by popular writers while a group of local publishers also emerged. Henry Chakava, one of the most influential editors at Heinemann Kenya at the time has noted that in the early 1970s, he was receiving manuscripts mainly on romance, crime and adventure. He recommended to his employers in London that they should start a new series for leisure reading and was allowed to start 'Spear Books', which became a huge success. His idea was soon picked up by Macmillan

who came up with their 'Pacesetter Series' also achieving instant success (Chakava, 1996: 51). Other publishing houses such as The East African Publishing House (EAPH) introduced the 'Modern African Library' which published Okot p' Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* as well as Charles Mangua's popular *Son of Woman*, while Longman launched 'Drumbeat Series'. Oxford University Press (OUP) established 'New drama from Africa' and 'New Fiction from Africa Series'. Writers such as David Maillu also launched their own series. Maillu launched 'Comb Books' after having his manuscripts rejected by the major publishing houses. He self-published popular titles such as *After 4.30*, *My Dear Bottle*, *Unfit for Human Consumption* and *Diary of a Prostitute* among others. Foundation Books, TransAfrica, Bookwise among many other small publishers also rolled out thrillers, romance fiction and crime series. Although prior to this 'boom' several works of fiction had been published in the country, the developments in the early 1970s marked the beginnings of popular fiction in the modern publishing industry in Kenya.

The "fat years" of publishing, as Chakava described the 1970s in Kenya, did not however go down well with a number of critics. A debate over quality ensued and some scholars, notably Chris Wanjala as I argued in my Introduction, criticised popular literature for being aesthetically wanting and incapable of "commitment" required of Third World literature. Wanjala (1978) accused writers of popular literature of merely seeking to "please the audience" (18). He described Maillu's writing, which was seen to be representative of popular writing in Kenya, as "… a trashy and scabrous imitation of brothel and low life especially yarned for the low-brow reader in this country" (136). Maillu had especially popularised this emergent literature, writing about what had previously been considered taboo topics. To Maillu, sex, for instance, was literary fodder and a number of his books including *After 4.30* (1974), *Unfit for Human Consumption* (1973) and *My Dear Bottle* (1973) contained lurid accounts of sexual encounters in a language that

Lindfors (1991) contemptuously describes as "presenting zesty love scenes with enthusiastic attention to extra-ordinary anatomical particularities" (56). Yet Maillu's books were easily best sellers. Lindfors (1991) notes that Maillu sold between 10,000 to 50,000 books in a year or two (55). Maillu's popularity crossed borders and in Tanzania he sold over 10,000 copies within six months before his books were banned in 1976.

Although Lindfors in hyperbolic overkill calls Maillu a "primitive pioneer and intrepid trailblazer" he acknowledges that Maillu helped release "an embryonic literary culture from the confining sac of taste and judgement" (99). Maillu and other writers notably Charles Mangua, Mwangi Ruheni, Meja Mwangi, Sam Kahiga among others popularised a genre that had for many years operated in the shadows of canonical writings. Although this group is by no means a discrete category, their distinctive style of writing signified an important shift in direction in the development of Kenyan literature.

I want to argue however that the popular press played a very significant role in the growth of popular literature in Kenya. Almost all the notable Kenyan writers who emerged in the 1970s began their writing careers and were nurtured within the Kenyan newspapers and popular magazines. The popular press provided a useful space for apprenticeship. It is in the popular press that many writers first published their work while others had their fiction serialised, a tradition that had been especially popular in Europe and in South Africa. Writers such as Sam Kahiga, Meja Mwangi, Sam Akare, Wahome Mutahi, David Maillu, even Ngugi wa Thiong'o were partly shaped either by the Kenyan newspaper or popular magazine.

Henry Chakava has noted that in the 1970s and particularly in 1976, there were on average thirty-six periodicals that were published regularly in Kenya. These included *Drum*, *True Love*, *Men Only, Trust*, *Viva* and *Joe* among others (See *Kenya Times*, January 15, 1989). For purposes of this discussion, I want to

use *Joe* and *Drum* as representative samples of the popular magazines in Kenya being arguably the most popular of these magazines especially in the 1970s. *Joe* was published regularly between 1973 and 1979 and can be credited for exposing the works of a number of popular fiction writers in Kenya. The magazine was named after a character 'Joe' who had been popularised by writer/publisher Hillary Ng'weno in a satirical newspaper column *With a Light Touch* published in the *Daily Nation*. Ng'weno co-founded *Joe* with Terry Hirst, a former lecturer at Kenyatta University. *Joe* defined the place of popular fiction in the newspaper and magazine genres by moulding what one may call a narrative frame for this genre. According to Frederiksen (1991), *Joe* served three main functions:

> [I]t was a mouthpiece of the new African middle and lower classes, it acted as a socialising agent, educating people on how to be urban and it contributed to a fairly democratic public sphere in which issues of importance to the urban population of Kenya could be voiced and discussed (cited in Newell, 2002: 101-2).

Tawana Kupe (1997) provides a similar argument about the role of the popular magazine in Zimbabwe noting how it "seeks to create a public sphere that is in principle accessible to all who have basic literacy skills to read and write… reporting a wide variety of issues across multiple genres, they seek to appeal to everyone" (140). The fiction writing in *Joe* significantly influenced the popular novel in Kenya. For instance, in terms of thematic orientation, *Joe*'s major concerns revolved around the everyday problems of the urban population, told in a language that was equally 'urbanised'. Both Maillu and Mangua's work also reflect these features.

Joe was partly modelled on the successful South African magazine *Drum*, arguably the most successful popular magazine yet in Africa. *Drum* was established in the 1950s in South Africa to cater for the black urban

population. In a foreword to Dorothy Woodson's *An Index to Africa's Leading Magazine 1951-1965*, Anthony Sampson, a former editor of the magazine, describes the 1950s in South Africa as a time when "the tensions and sufferings in townships pressed blacks both to laugh and protest at them", a situation that naturally engendered the emergence and politicisation of various sites of cultural production including theatre, music, and fiction. Historically, the 1950s saw the rigorous enforcement of the apartheid system in South Africa following National Party's ascension to power in 1948. The period also coincided with the stepping up of the defiance against the apartheid regime by the African National Congress (ANC). The black popular media among several forms of popular arts gradually evolved into sites of popular protest. Founded by James Bailey, R. J. Stratford and R. J Crisp, *Drum* was edited over successive years by Anthony Sampson, Sylvester Stein and Tom Hopkinson. While originally published only in South Africa, the magazine later published separate editions for East, West and Central Africa. *Drum's* approach to social and political commentary was through investigative exposés, photography and fiction. The magazine also featured personality profiles, local news, gossip columns and literary essays. In its early years *Drum's* writers included popular names such as Henry Nxumalo also known as "Mr. Drum", Can Themba, Todd Matshikiza, Arthur Maimane, Casey Motsitsi and Nat Nakasa. Others who worked at the magazine but were already emerging literary names in the country included Ezekiel Mphahlele and Lewis Nkosi. Several contributors from other parts of Africa were also published in the magazine. Dorothy Woodson (1988) argues that individually and collectively, these writers developed a new form of journalism, which she has called the "Drum School". It was a kind of writing that "had a certain immediacy and vibrancy to it… in spite of their own frustrations, the writers were capable of laughing at themselves and this gave a particular bittersweet ambiance to the magazine, at least through the 1950s" (4). Rabkin (1975) describes the fiction in *Drum* as having been marked with a "distinctive style and flavour of its own… so often unorthodox in its

execution… it reflected both naiveté and sophistication to an unusual degree" (108). Today, *Drum* is considered the prototype of the popular magazine tradition in Africa and its influences were easily discernible in *Joe* magazine and later in fiction columns such as *Whispers* in the mainstream newspapers.

Drum featured a number of genres; poetry, short fiction, cartoons, gossip columns, letters column, among others. Some of the columns which were to have a lasting influence in the magazine tradition in Africa included, "Speak up man" (letters to the editor), "Ask Dolly", a column that handled readers' personal problems, often of a sexual nature. This has turned out to be one of the most enduring columns in the popular magazine and newspaper in Africa. The fiction columns, also known as the "thematic columns" included Todd Matshikitza's "With the Lid Off" described by Woodson (1988) as a "kind of social work type column specialising in tough luck stories" (5); Casey Motsisi's "On the Beat" which was part factual, part fictional and featured the writer's escapades in and around shebeens in Sophiatown (ibid.). Motsitsi also wrote "If Bugs Were Men", a highly satirical condemnation of apartheid. Among the columns written by foreign contributors was "West African Whispers" by Nelson Ottah who wrote under the pseudonym Coz Idapo for the magazine's West African edition, but also featured in the Johannesburg edition (ibid.).

The Kenyan popular magazine and especially *Joe* featured an array of genres similar to those published in *Drum*, among them, and perhaps the most popular, the fiction stories and thematic columns. It is especially the thematic columns that Frederiksen finds definitive of *Joe's* "excellence". *Joe* carried an original short story in every issue, a number of part fiction, part factual columns, and a letters column similar to *Drum's* "Speak up Man". The letters column in *Joe* was titled "Dear Joe". To encourage dialogue and discussion, readers were encouraged to join in debates, and responses were often solicited. *Joe* would ask readers to "drop me a letter expressing your feelings

about things – even about me? I might print it—and then again I might not" (Frederiksen, 1991, cited in Newell, 2002: 98). *Joe* also featured plenty of visuals but more particularly graphics. Where *Drum* used photographs, *Joe* used graphics perhaps owing to its comparatively modest economic base. Graphics in *Joe* appeared in many forms including satirical drawings, comic scripts and illustrated jokes. Most stories were also illustrated, another lasting feature in the popular press' visual culture in Kenya. Some of the most featured cartoon strips included *City Life* by Edward Gitau, which comprised tales of the "ruralites" in Nairobi. Gitau was also the creator of *Kalulu* a popular cartoon strip in *Taifa Leo* and *Taifa*. Others included *O.K, Sue!' A City-Girl's View* by Kimani Gathingiri and Terry Hirst's *Daddy Wasiwasi & Co* and *The Good, the Bed and the Ugali,* a bastardisation of "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly" (Frederiksen, 1991 cited in Newell, 2002: 101). Most of the fiction was illustrated mainly to amplify narrative meanings and assist in decipherment. In subsequent years especially in the newspapers, illustrations were to become permanent features in the Kenyan newspapers' visual culture.

Among the thematic columns in *Joe* was Hillary Ng'weno's *My Friend Joe*, a column that interrogated social and political issues much like Matshikitza's "With the Lid Off", Nelson Ottah's "West African Whispers" and Casey Motsitsi's "On the Beat". *My Friend Joe* inspired similar columns, both in Kiswahili and English language newspapers in subsequent years. For instance, we see the column's influence in the early issues of *Whispers*. Below is an excerpt of *My Friend Joe*:

> Wait a minute. Drinking is the most African problem thing God created after creating the African race. Look around you. What do you see? Drunks. African drunks. I tell you that's the most African thing on earth, drinking' (*Joe*, November 1974, cited in Newell, 2002: 97-98).

Addressing a social problem, just like Ng'weno above, Mutahi writes in *Whispers*:

> If you are like other many strong-willed men who constantly defy an animal called the 'annual budget' and his son called 'price increases' and insists on having a pint regularly, you must have an acquaintance with charming Virtue, Mapenzi. You see, Mapenzi is a master illusionist. However, she is not a witch. Even the worst of whisper-mongers credit her with at least one virtue – comforting lonely hearts and making sure that your pocket remains balanced towards a deficit (*East African Standard*, May 14, 1983).

Quite apart from the fact that thematically both columns are addressing a social problem, there are other notable similarities. The truth is served with a smile, but in a way that demands self-reflection and calls for positive remedial action. The ironic mode intensifies the problem. The columns are also conversational almost as though the writers are "conversing" with people they know. Ng'weno converses with his readers; "Look around. What do you see?" Mutahi does the same; "You see, Mapenzi is a master illusionist". Both writers also use the third-person voice, assuming the roles of "teacher". Later however, Mutahi's *Whispers* would drift away from the "third person" to "first person", where the narrator occupies the same position as his readers, speaking not for them but "with them".

Ng'weno left *Joe* magazine in 1974 to set up the *Weekly Review*, arguably the most successful political magazine yet in Kenya's history. In an interview with Berth Lindfors cited by Frederiksen in her discussion of *Joe*, Ng'weno claimed that one of his reasons for leaving *Joe* was because "he felt it was important to tell people what was happening before making fun of what was happening" (cited in Newell, 2002: 94). Although it appears Ng'weno was dissatisfied with the effectiveness of humour as a way of making significant

social and political statements, this is not to suggest it was necessarily ineffective. Ng'weno's departure did not significantly affect *Joe*. By using articles and graphics from contributors, *Joe* had helped nurture a corps of emerging talent, among them Sam Kahiga and Meja Mwangi, while writers like Ngugi also occasionally contributed to the magazine. Some of these writers such as Kahiga were particularly popular with readers. *Joe's* co-founder Terry Hirst called Kahiga "the representative *Joe* writer" (Frederiksen 1991, cited in Newell, 2002: 100). Hirst describes Kahiga's style as a "touch lighter than Ngugi's and Mwangi's even though these two helped set the standard of high quality, which most stories at least approach" (ibid.). Kahiga found his metier in the short story. While at *Joe*, he was particularly notable for his capacity to "turn any topic into a pointed humorous narrative, with a human angle" (ibid.). Kahiga would, in Frederiksen's parlance, often use "an autobiographical form, making available his own fictive experience with *matatus* (commuter taxis), secretaries of the law, and in brief sketches and description bring to life the quick and hard qualities of urban existence" (cited in Newell, 2002: 100). This autobiographical type of writing also featured prominently in *Drum* and especially in Casey Motsitsi's "On the Beat". For instance, in "The Beedee Stuff", Motsitsi writes:

> I have been running into dead ends since last month that I am beginning to have a lot of worriation. Spells of bad luck… Only three days ago some wise guys got my absence and made off with all the stuff I cover myself with when coming town – two shirts and a pair of trousers I bought in a jumble sale. They also guzzled the bottle of hooch I always keep for medicinal purposes…(*Drum*, November 1958: 73).

Motsitsi always combined fiction with fact and wrote from sometimes "imagined" personal experiences. With little variation, the autobiographical style was adopted by Kahiga and several other writers of popular fiction in the Kenyan popular press who were to emerge in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Kahiga later wrote the fiction column *Kibao* in the *Standard* while other writers such as Kenneth Watene wrote *Masharubu's World* in the *Sunday Nation*, Benson Riungu started *Life on the Low* and later *Off the Wall*, a column which was originally written by Brian Tetley**.** Riungu later wrote *Benson's World*, which survives today. Those who broke into the mainstream newspaper in the 1980s included Wahome Mutahi writing *Whispers*, Yusuf Dawood who still writes *Surgeon's Diary*, and Gakiha Weru who wrote *Urbanite*. There were several other short-lived experiments in the late 1980s through the 1990s.

In July 1983, *Whispers*, a small column barely occupying a quarter of a page was created in the humour pages of the *East African Standard* to run alongside John Macklin's column "Stranger than Fiction". The name *Whispers* loosely reflected what the writer believed would be the column's main preoccupation—discussing "things that Kenyans did but were only comfortable acknowledging privately".[3] Another strange influence in the choice of the name according to the writer of the column was a *shebeen* called *Mihehu* (Whispers in Gikuyu) in Mutahi's village in Nyeri. A notice pinned on the door allegedly read: "when you come in, do not raise your voice". Interestingly, Mutahi recalled during an interview with this researcher that once inside the s*hebeen*, whenever the patrons got drunk they always ended up singing—"raising their voices". The *shebeen* thus provided him a fascinating allegory. The *shebeen* provided a space, just like the column, where a number of issues could be introduced as and in 'whispers' but would soon be discussed openly and loudly by the patrons. Perhaps equally notable is the fact that similar fiction columns that preceded *Whispers* often relied on bar room buffoonery, the bar providing a space of 'relative freedom' for the writers. The assumption that what was said at a moment of inebriation would not be taken seriously was a reliable subterfuge to introduce 'taboo' topics. For writers, this was one of the ways in which certain norms, political and social, were broached in a public space. But there is also a possibility that the

[3] Personal interview with Mutahi, February, 2003

writer appropriated the name from Nelson Ottah's "West African Whispers" which as noted above featured in *Drum* magazine. The column presented what Anthony Sampson describes as an "extremely sardonic view of political events in West Africa" (cited in Stein, 1999: 6).

As earlier noted, the early issues of *Whispers* were hugely predictable, almost mundane "instructive" narratives reminiscent of the instructive manuals of the 'market literature tradition'. In fact, they reminded one of market literature such as the Onitsha Market literature (Newell, 2001). Titles such as "The ups and downs of dating" *(Sunday Standard, November 13, 1983),* "The art of borrowing money" (*Sunday Standard*, October 23, 1983), "The gospel according to Prophet H.Y.E.N.A" (*Sunday Standard,* December 18, 1983*),* "A world full of liars" *(Sunday Standard, July 10, 1983)* were common in the column in the early 1980s and points to the overt instructional intent of the writer. The column generally had a strong reformational character. In its later years however, the column was to gravitate towards the political. It evolved into a form of 'mini-republic' to use Odhiambo's (1987: 200) words, embodying the subversive. Sample articles that capture this character include: "SOS thinking of defecting from the shilling economy" (*Standard on Sunday*, June 28, 1992), "The Day SOS met Kiganjo Boys" (*Standard on Sunday,* March 15, 1992), "Operation Whispers Out" (*Standard on Sunday,* November 25, 1992), "Total Man's house divided: Agip House raring to go to war" (*Standard on Sunday* September 13, 1992). The allusions, imagery and language in the titles gesture towards the political. Most of the stories reflect political events in the country. For instance, in "Total Man's House Divided: Agip House raring to go", a domestic quarrel between a man and his wife who happen to belong to different tribes is narrated against the background of the tribal clashes in the country. Similarly, the domestic "fall-out" is to be seen against the background of the political fall-out between members of an opposition party FORD, at the time a formidable opposition outfit in Kenya. Marital infidelity is explained using political imagery. There is a sense in

which the writer began to domesticate the national and 'nationalise' the domestic. This inversion in the column allowed for political critique.

It is also important that one notes the influences of what was to be known as New Journalism on the writings in *Drum*, *Joe* and later works of writers such as Mutahi. Also known as 'immersion journalism or literary journalism', New Journalism refers to a 'movement' that emerged in the 1960s in the United States although there were similar trends elsewhere in the world including Africa. It is largely described as having been "a generational revolt against the stylistic and political constraints of cold-war journalism, a rebellion against the drab detached writing of the big-city dailies and the machine-like prose". [4] The proponents of New Journalism such as Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson and Joan Didion argued that straight journalism reduced everything to details, a situation described by Modue (2002) as "an impartiality that becomes desensitising and objective to the point of emotional irrelevance… To do the job fully, there was need for a little soul and poetry, a little shaking up" (cited in the *Nation,* June, 2002, Vol. 274 (17): 40).

New Journalism revolutionised writing in the popular press, subverting traditional news reporting by using symbols, imagery and imaginative language in news writing. Besides, the writing also experimented with character developments in literary work while writers also became involved in the writing. It was in effect an interface between journalism and literary writing.

There are elements of this tradition in *Drum*, *Joe* and even in fiction columns such as *Whispers*. For instance, we see a complete negation of what Mark Mordue describes as "emotional irrelevance of writing". Instead, we see Mutahi directly or indirectly, through his characters, sometimes immersed in the stories he is telling. Indeed, they are not just stories, Mutahi's work is part

[4] Source unknown to the researcher.

journalism. As I noted earlier in the thesis, Mutahi's use of the first-person involves him as a writer in the emotional contours of his narratives. One also notices the use of the symbolic, of imagery and of a highly imaginative language, which we briefly discuss below, rupture with the more traditional conventions of journalistic writing.

But New Journalism also provided a number of challenges for writers. Pegi Taylor acknowledges that it "takes tremendous craft for a non-fiction writer to dominate his subject" (cited in *Writer*, 2002: 29). For, "once immersed in it, it becomes difficult for writers to also act as reporters" (ibid.). Quoting Christopher Hanson, she notes the "professional tug of war between telling a good story and the desire to report thoroughly, analyse and explain" (ibid.) Joan Didion on the other hand explains that when this style works it goes unnoticed, but when it fails "it swamps the narrative and leaves the reader toting up errors or misapprehensions" (ibid.).

The point I am making is that *Whispers* did not grow out of a vacuity. Even as he broke new ground, Mutahi's column emerged from existing traditions. We see influences of *Drum*, of New Journalism, of *Joe* and especially of writers such as Kahiga, Ng'weno and Brian Tetley. Indeed, Mutahi revealed in an interview that he had hoped the Kenyan newspaper would also produce its own Can Tembas, Henry Nxumalos, Bloke Modisanes, Es'kia Mphaleles and Nat Nakasas, writers who made *Drum* arguably one of the most powerful sites of social and political commentary in South Africa. According to Mutahi, *Drum* and *Whispers* represented a 'new genre' where the popular media through popular writing would provide a new space for social and political reflection, and direction. To Mutahi therefore, *Whispers* was supposed to foster a genre, revive a lost tradition and possibly create lasting progenies.

As noted earlier, most of the fiction columns published in the Kenyan press including *Whispers* at its formative years, were limited in terms of narrative

possibilities. Instructive writing barely sustains fiction. Quite often, this form of writing calls for the use of a large cast of characters, all too frequently changed to the extent that readers fail to relate with them. Njabulo Ndebele has pointed out that instructive writing "inhibits the development of stories about ordinary feelings and experiences" (cited in Newell 2001: 5). Partly because of this but also because of the repressive political environment and the rapid social transformation in Kenya, *Whispers* was to radically transform in the late 1980s. It is within this transformation that one notes the influences of prose writers such as Ferdinand Oyono, Chinua Achebe and one of Mutahi's most favourite novelists Mongo Beti. Mutahi noted during an interview with the researcher that it is writers like Beti who "understand the conceptual nuances of African rural life",[5] a key aspect in Mutahi's narratives. He remarked that Mongo Beti has a special way of moulding "rural" characters especially noting his portrayal of Medza in *Mission to Kala* (1958). In the novel, Medza fights for cognition when she discovers herself in "a strange universe and reacts strongly to anything that departs from her own cultural expectations and prejudices" (Lindfors, 1991: 65). It is a relationship that defines Mutahi's portrayal of the Kenyan 'urbanite' and is particularly captured by Mutahi's main character, Whispers.

Among some of the radical transformations in *Whispers* included shifts in the column's narrative framework and thematic trends. Mutahi created a parallel fictional family from where he situated his fiction. He set *Whispers* within a fictional Kenyan family comprising the characters Whispers, Thatcher (Whisper's wife), the Investment (daughter) and Whispers Jr. (Son). Other characters who were however transient included Teacher Damiano (Whispers' former teacher), Father Camissasius (Whisper's former Catholic priest), Appepklonia (Whispers's Mother), Rhoda (a barmaid), Uncle Jethro

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

(Whispers' Uncle), Aunt Kezia (Whispers' Aunt) among others.[6] These characters were used as allegorical characters becoming determinative tropes, discourse markers and acting as points of reference for readers of the column. The 'new' *Whispers* was loosely modelled on Mutahi's real-life family—his wife Ricarda Njoki (as Thatcher), Octavia Muthoni (as Appepklonia), Caroline Muthoni (as the Investment) and Patrick Mutahi (as Whispers Junior alias the domestic thug). An interesting omission in the column's permanent characters was Whispers' father. It is instructive to point out that in the 1950s when Mutahi was growing up, traditional life in rural Kenya had been significantly disrupted as the wage economy and Christianity became integrated in the Kenyan social life. The school and the church replaced the father as the centres of knowledge in rural Kenya. Since for the most time of the year the father was away from home, it is the mother the school, and the church, that mostly influenced a child's early years and not the father as would ordinarily have been the case.

The main character who lends the column its name, Whispers also called 'Son of the Soil' is stereotyped as a typical Kenyan male, unapologetically chauvinistic, opinionated and self-indulgent, a narrative figure already partly defined and popularised by several other writers of popular literature such as Mangua, Kahiga and Maillu. But this character speaks for many 'Sons of the Soil'. He epitomises their anxieties at a time of rapid social and political transformation. Within the context of the harsh political realities of the period, his name also gestures at certain forms of resistance, which I discuss shortly. Mutahi indicated during one of my interviews that the character was among the most popular in the column, judging from the correspondence he received from readers. It is this character who inspires events and the mood of the column. Thatcher on the other hand became the model for the new Kenyan woman. In the 1980s, the most visible female symbol of "independence", at

[6] The Consolata missionaries were Italian and some of these names reflect their influence around the Mt. Kenya region.

least in the popular imagination in Kenya was former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher was a popular figure in the Kenyan media and it is because of her visibility and her reputation as the "Iron Lady", that the name was appropriated in the column to partly reflect the 'new woman'. In the column, like the former premier, Thatcher is portrayed as a domineering woman, a matriarch who challenges maledom and its notions of "established order". Thatcher is not the "good time girl"—the weak and fun loving woman of the city. Thatcher became the symbol of the changing times, portrayed as representing a new culture that privileged individual personal liberties. 'The investment' and Whispers Jr on the other hand were used as allegorical characters to represent an urban youth culture whose expressive dress sense and language symbolised their latent anxieties and desires in the new era. These characters reject certain norms such as the perception of the girl in the family as a source of wealth. In fact, Mutahi explained in an interview that the naming of 'The Investment' was directly inspired by his father's view of one of Mutahi's sisters. Often, the old man would come back home drunk late in the night and call his daughter "my one thousand". To Mutahi's father, the daughter was an 'investment' whose returns would come with marriage. It is some of these issues that Mutahi attempts to address with 'The Investment'. I give a detailed reading of these characters in a separate chapter.

Creating characters in *Whispers* necessitated a redefinition of among other things, the column's language. Bardolph (1998) argues that the choice of language in popular writing also involves "a choice of readers, of tone, of concepts" (106). Bardolph observes that where this must be done, some writers "try to explore new modes that would address a society where diglossia is the norm" (107). These new modes involve the use of a language defined within particular socio-cultural spaces. Mutahi introduced a language that reflected the popular speech patterns in the country. This language undermines the dominant practices in fiction by reworking and subverting grammatical conventions especially of the English language. The column

assumes a polyglot readership able to operate a complex set of mixed codes. Latent in this writing is a construction of an audience defined by among other things, one's ability to operate these mixed codes. Barber (1997b) supports the idea that a particular audience is formed on the basis of language, giving the example of Ghanaian concert party where language is used in the interpellation of readers as "citizens of a polyglot nation able to operate mixed codes while still remaining capable of addressing the condensed allusion of the discourses…" (354). The language in *Whispers* was also an attempt by the writer to dramatise the limits of the column's circulation. By speaking a language of his readerships, Mutahi was in effect expanding the reach of the column. Below is an example of how this language is used in the column.

> According to the professor of politics who has never been inside a university lecture room, come January next year one real professor of mathematics will be calling a man who was born when I was the village twist dancing champion, "Mtukufu baba" (Trans: His Eminence father). The professor of politics has said that *wapende wasipende* (Trans: whether they like it or not), the man who stopped speaking *Sheng'* just the other day when someone whispered into his ear that he could follow his father's footsteps and become president, cannot develop malaria if he got the main job in State House. The agemates of the young man are also telling him, "*Uhush, wewe mufiti kuwa prezzo. Steto hau ni yako. Mabuda kama Saitosh waume vako"* (Trans: Uhuru you are fit to be president. State House is yours. Old men like Saitoti should stand aside). Others are telling him … A guy swing us *jobos* (jobs) when you get there" (*Sunday Nation*, August 11, 2001).

Above, we see a language that is only *just* English. Apart from the political allusions and imagery that a Kenyan reader familiar with the political process in the country can easily decode, infused in what should be English are

Kiswahili words as well as the urban lingua *Sheng'*. Equally important are the markers of discourse such as "professor of politics", meant to refer to President Moi, who had once claimed to be a "professor of politics". The "real professor of mathematics" is a reference to Moi's then vice-president George Saitoti who is a university professor. Other markers include Uhush, a contraction for Uhuru, here referring to Jomo Kenyatta's son Uhuru Kenyatta who had been "anointed" by Moi as his successor. Several of the "idioms" appropriated in the text can only be understood within a particular socio-cultural space even though an attempt is made in the subsequent paragraph to make sense of the message. Interestingly, it is unlikely that this "linguistic maze" causes any confusion to the intended readership. Instead the language creates its own unique audience. The writer thus imagines a public that is able to decode the text with all its mixed codes, code switching and allusions. When the text excludes through language, it disempowers some but at the same time empowers a particular in-group (Githiora, 2002).

The language adopted in *Whispers* however came under intense criticism especially from schoolteachers. "People had just woken up from David Maillu and were not ready for another Maillu," noted Mutahi during an interview with this researcher.[7] As outlined above, Maillu had been furiously debated in the 1970s through the 1980s. *Whispers* came under similar attacks. Although the column was not entirely modelled on "Maillusque", it was criticised for being thin on imagination and typecast just as Maillu's work as imitative rather than imaginative. Constant criticism was mostly levelled on the language in *Whispers*. Kenyan English language teachers accused Mutahi of "bastardising the English language" and complained about its deleterious effect on their students.[8] Mutahi however argued that this language adequately mediated the realities he was interested in exploring. Mutahi

[7] Personal interview with Mutahi, February, 2003

[8] Critics raised similar complaints about the fiction published in the *Drum* magazine. Peter Nazareth, for instance, criticised the "gross misuse of the English language" and the deleterious effect of *Drum*'s style on the speech patterns of youth all over Africa (cited in Stein, 1999: 9).

appears to have also been aware that there is a sense in which language encodes certain values and practices. For instance, in one of his early articles titled "English language R.I.P", he writes : "… [y]ou meet a fellow in the morning when you are suffering from a splitting headache, perhaps caused by the joys of Friday night at the disco and when he asks you how you feel, you beam and say, "fine thank you!" (*Sunday Standard*, November 6, 1983). Mutahi then argues that having a splitting headache is not a "fine" condition. He wonders why, to say otherwise in English would invite derision. He finds the English language "as is" inappropriate in certain contexts and therefore deliberately "bends it". Clearly, he demonstrates how language carries with it certain values and mannerisms and in this case how the English language also carries with it certain mannerisms which he seems to disavow.

Mutahi was also accused of 'polluting form to elevate the event'. While it is true that the column relies sometimes on rhetoric and clichés and that this on occasion affects the quality of the writer's arguments, this strategy should also be seen as necessitated by other factors. Indeed, Newell (2001) has defended this style of writing arguing that popular writings understandably "pollute form" because sometimes they are "concerned with the reconstruction and documentation of their immediate surroundings rather than their interpretation" (100). Newell (1997) further argues that some authors' refusal to adopt European plot conventions is often deliberate and should not be taken as a mark of literary incompetence, but as an indication that fictionality has been marginalized in favour of the didactic, problem-solving approach to narrative. Mutahi's decision to employ this demotic register should therefore not be taken as a mark of incompetence. Indeed, Mutahi's educational background, which we discuss below, leaves no doubt that this decision was very deliberate.

The 'Making' of (Paul) Wahome Mutahi

Wahome Mutahi was born in October 24, 1954 in Nyeri, Central Kenya, a place he immortalised in his work as "the slopes of Mount Kenya",[9] possibly a literal reference to the region's mountainous topography. Nyeri was the second settlement of the Consolata Missionaries in Kenya and generally had a strong missionary presence, both Catholic and Protestant. Mutahi admits to his upbringing as having been hugely influenced by the Catholic Church. He was even 'forced' into a seminary by his parents.[10] Baptised Paul, a name he was to drop later in life, Mutahi became an altar boy at his local church, living the life that was supposed to have led him to priesthood. It is a life he refers to quite regularly in *Whispers*. Like most Kenyans, Christianity had a significant impact on Mutahi's life both as a child and as adult. In a later chapter, I argue that because of decades of Christian missionary evangelisation and education, Christianity has become a part of Kenya's popular traditions. Despite initially being pressurised by his parents to train as a Catholic priest, Mutahi refused to make it to the altar, 'robed'. Although "the word" remained his vocation, he became a 'priest' of another kind, of 'whispers'. Mutahi often prided in "congregating a far bigger audience through *Whispers* than I would have had I become a Catholic priest".[11]

Mutahi was one of five boys in a family of seven. His father Elijah Mutahi died in 1972 although the writer's early childhood as noted earlier, mainly revolved around his mother, the school and the church. Because his father was always away most of the time, young Mutahi established what he calls "a

[9] "The slopes" is one of the most important settings / spaces for Mutahi's narratives. Ogude (1996) argues that "when an author chooses a particular setting for his or her novel, it shows they believe that the physical setting of the narrative has an important function to play in the novel" (132). The "slopes" is to Mutahi what Illmorog is to Ngugi wa Thiong'o. It is, to borrow Ogude's words in a related discussion, "a centre stage to re-enact Kenya's history…" (Ibid.).

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

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

special relationship" with his mother Octavia Muthoni, a relationship that is constantly revisited in *Whispers* where one of the characters Appepklonia (hereafter referred to as Appep) is a 'literary clone' of Mutahi's mother Muthoni and shares with the character Whispers a similar relationship that Mutahi shared with his mother. Quite often, it is Appep who acts as Whispers' moral guide in the column just like Muthoni with Mutahi. But Appep also gives us the face of a mother figure that is quite different from Thatcher. She is almost an anti-thesis of Thatcher. During Mutahi's early years, at the insistence of his mother, he attended St. Paul's Seminary in Nyeri for his primary education later proceeding to St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary in Nairobi for his O-level education. However, after only three months, Mutahi was expelled from the school. Mutahi says his expulsion was because his lifestyle was deemed "incompatible with Catholic teachings".[12] He claims to have rebelled because Catholic education was too authoritarian, too guided and dogmatic. In 1972, he returned to "the slopes" and joined Kirimara High School in Nyeri for his A-level education having rejected a possible life as a priest. Incidentally, while at St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary, he had developed a keen interest in literature although the school allegedly discouraged students from studying literature, which at the time was considered "subversive" to the minds of young Catholics. As a result, Mutahi did not formally read literature at O-levels. But he claims to have persuaded his new headmaster at Kirimara to allow him study literature at A-levels. This decision was to mark a turning point in the former altar boy's life. He passed his A-levels examinations and joined the University of Nairobi in 1974 to study for a BA in Literature. At the university, Mutahi remarks that he was later to be influenced in a number of ways, which we discuss separately, by his literature lecturers who included among others, Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

After completing his BA degree in 1978, Mutahi was employed as a District Officer by the Kenya government and served in Meru and Machakos districts.

[12] Personal interview with Mutahi, February, 2003

One notes influences of his experiences as a public administrator in *Whispers*. He writes with the buoyancy of an insider who understands and disavows the bureaucracy of public administration, especially the condescension with which the government performs its power. When in early 2002 his play *Ngoma cia aka* (The Whirlwind)[13] was banned by a District Officer in Nyeri "on security grounds", Mutahi satirically tore into the public administration (read government) exploiting the situation to expose the vanity of the country's political leadership. The provincial administration had claimed that staging the play amounted to "a public gathering" which required notification of a whole range of state apparatuses. The administration also argued that the play was "obscene and pornographic". Below is an excerpt of the article in which Mutahi uses his alter ego Whispers to comment on the banning of the play but which, in fact, offers us a glimpse of how he critiqued power.

> Just when I was getting in the mood of making a fool of myself, I got word that there was a new chief, nay, an emperor, who often got annoyed when natives made merry. He did not like the natives dancing excessively so he had declared a dance called *Mugiithi* subversive and banned it. He made sure that anyone seen shaking his shoulders in a manner likely to suggest the dancing of *Mugiithi* after ten in the night was made an unwilling guest of the men in blue. Like Bwana Ndithii of those early days, something tells the new emperor that whenever the people of the slopes begin to dance, they are up to some evil (*Sunday Nation* April, 7, 2002).

When Whispers (Mutahi) asked the administration police why they did not want the play staged, he writes:

[13] The play is as a relatively innocuous drama about family life yet was read as "politically sensitive" by the provincial administration since it was performed in the Gikuyu language, a testimony to officialdom's paranoia over areas it is unable to have direct control. The vernacular in Kenya has traditionally been feared as potentially subversive. Ironically, the British colonial administration also thought it was subversive thus enforcing the learning of English with zeal.

The one who looked like a former Chinkororo[14] was the first to speak, *"Wapi license ya mchezo? Wapi permit ya DC? Wapi licence ya polisi? Wapi barua ya chief ya mchezo? Wapi kitambulisho? Wapi entertainment permit? Wapi Wapi?"* (Trans: Where's the licence for the play, where's the DC's permit, the Police permit, where is the letter from the chief of plays? Where's your ID, where's the entertainment permit, where… where?) I suppose he was about to ask to be shown my death certificate too… Then I made the first mistake. I decided to speak in English, thinking it might impress the former Chinkororo and make him think I knew what I was doing. "Pray, tell me without hesitation or repetition, who says that I need bureaucratic licences to be a thespian. Matters of theatrical persuasion and enactment don't need to be legislated. No one has the caveat to disengage me from my literary pursuits!" …[t]he former Chinkororo talked into his walkie-talkie and said, "Inspector Bwire speaking, over. *Kanatoa matusi eti hakaogopi serikali. Eti sijui serikali ni thespian, sijui ati legico…. Yes sir… Eti ata-pursue sisi out.* Yes sir, yes sir… Over and out." (Trans: He is insulting us. He claims he does not respect the government…He is saying that the government is not a thespian… Yes sir. He is saying that he will pursue us…). The fellow in the Kaunda suit came closer to my face and showered me with saliva as he said, "*Gamzee, utagoma hiyo kizungu yago mingi. Nafigilia sisi hatugusoma? Chunga mdomo.* (Trans: Old man you will have to stop addressing us in English. Do you think we did not go to school? Watch your mouth!) Then he did a Kiganjo war dance around me as he swore, "Hagi ya Mama, haga gamzee nitaua!" (I swear by my mother I will kill this old man!) (*Sunday Nation*, April 7, 2002).

[14] This was a group of "thugs on hire" who gained notoriety in the 1990s among the Abagusii in Western Kenya. The name later found expression in popular Kenyan political lore and became a familiar symbol in the country's political discourse denoting one of the state's modalities of political management, resorting to violence to establish order.

The narrator dramatises his mistreatment at the hands of the provincial administration, turning the story into a hilarious yet hugely discomfiting drama. The police officers who confront the narrator are depicted as illiterate goons but also as 'robots' of the regime unable to question any orders from their masters. The excerpt narrates the gamut of the oppressive politics of the colonial administration but one whose continuum Mutahi sees in the post-independence administration. The new polity oppresses the Kenyan subject just like the colonial administration did with the native. The confrontation is narrated as a drama, which tells its own story. It betrays officialdom's fear of popular theatre's potential to unite publics around national issues and more so, popular theatre's ability to explain these issues in the "language of the rural peasantry", a language over which the government has no direct control. Meanwhile, District Officers, chiefs and the administration police are laughingly if tellingly depicted as "emperors", indeed, very powerful actors in the village political economy but largely symbolic of the oppressive political system.[15] The excerpt above also highlights some features that were characteristic of this column, the wit and satire, its narration of topical issues including the politically sensitive humorously, which deceptively made it look 'harmless' and irrelevant. The language he uses is characterised by complex code switching and code mixing as he appropriates registers commonly used by a cross section of the society yet which remain intelligible to an audience he anticipates.

After his brief stint as a District Officer, Mutahi enrolled for an MA in Literature at the University of Nairobi and reportedly even started working on his thesis on Indian literature, later writing a student's guide to Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*. However, Mutahi cut short his studies when he was offered a job as a trainee sub-editor at the *Nation* newspapers. Interestingly, after only

[15] Officialdom's fear of community theatre is a tradition best narrated by the tribulations of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Kamĩrĩĩthu theatre. Ngugi was jailed for nearly a year by the Moi government partly because of his involvement in the highly political Kamĩrĩĩthu theatre.

three months into the job, the then news editor Philip Ochieng'[16] recommended Mutahi's sacking describing him as "untrainable". Ochieng' was uncomfortable with Mutahi's unconventional style of writing. In the Kenyan media, Ochieng' was especially renowned for his impatience with budding journalists and especially those who attempted to 'depart from the canon'. Mutahi admits he was lucky to have been retained at the Nation and only moved to a different desk—the features desk—where he later served both as a sub-editor as well as a features writer. Mutahi notes that at the time he joined the *Nation*, Ochieng's word was 'law' in the Kenyan media and "to disregard his (Ochieng's) opinion was to disregard journalistic wisdom having been an old hand at journalism in Kenya and helping train nearly all the leading journalists in the country at the time".[17] Two years later, Mutahi got a job at the *Standard* newspapers, a fierce competitor of the *Nation* as a full-time senior sub-editor. It is while at his new job "desk job" at the *Standard* that he started the column *Whispers*.

Apart from writing the column *Whispers,* Mutahi was also an accomplished novelist, playwright and essayist. At both the *Nation* and *Standard* newspapers, Mutahi wrote two regular political commentaries "Where it Matters" and "The Way I See it". However, because of the (political) constraints on both the form and thematic options of the 'news' and 'commentary' sub-genres in the Kenyan newspapers, these columns were short-lived. More "editorial freedom" was to be found in fiction—*Whispers.* Having already made a name in the mainstream press, Mutahi also ventured into the novel form.

[16] Philip Ochieng' is arguably one of the most experienced journalists in Kenya. His journalism career now spans over 30 years. He has edited nearly all the major daily newspapers and magazines published in Kenya. Incidentally, in the 1960s, Ochieng' also wrote a column 'Pengle Pengle', which can also be located within the 'popular' tradition that he later found so 'unconventional'.

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

As a novelist, Bardolph (1998) has compared Mutahi to renowned South African writers Peter Abrahams and Alex La Guma. Although Bardolph does not explain the similarities between these writers, she hints at the writer's aesthetic which is underlined by what Njabulo Ndebele describes as a sense of "recognition, understanding, historical documentation and indictment" (cited in Newell, 2001:5). These features are to be found in a number of Mutahi's novels which include *The House of Doom* published posthumously and later serialised by the *Nation* newspapers, *The Miracle Merchants* (2003), *Doomsday* (1999), *Jail Bugs* (1996) and *Three Days on the Cross* (1991). He also published a collection of humorous anecdotes *How to be a Kenyan* (1996), which was reprinted four times in as many years. Mutahi's most celebrated novel however was *Three Days on the Cross*. In 1992, he received the Jomo Kenyatta Award for Literature, the highest literary award in Kenya for the novel. Bardolph (1998) describes this novel as "an angry account of the failure of democracy… in an imaginary country where journalists are brutalised when they try to expose the truth about mismanagement and fraud in high places" (123). The novel prominently features important markers to Mutahi's narrative style, his interests in both documentation and indictment, his merging of fact and fiction into a powerful hyperbole which readers are then forced to confront, the pervasiveness of wit and irony, among others. Although fictitious, *Three Days on the Cross* combines reality with dramatised versions of Mutahi's real-life experiences. Working as a journalist, Mutahi was brutalised by agents of the Moi regime in the 1980s during a crackdown on perceived dissident voices in the country. In 1986 together with his brother Njuguna Mutahi, they were arrested and later jailed for 15 months after pleading guilty under duress to '*Mwakenya*-related' charges. The two brothers pleaded "guilty" to "neglecting to report the existence of an anti-government organisation *Mwakenya*" (See *Kenya Taking Liberties*, 1991). *Mwakenya* is an acronym for "Muungano wa Wazalendo wa Kuikomboa Kenya", loosely translated as "The Progressive Movement to Liberate Kenya" (Maina wa Kinyatti, 1996). This was an underground movement that was formed in the

1970s. The Moi government accused the movement of clandestine activities. Critics have noted however that this movement gave the Moi administration a convenient excuse to persecute its political opponents. Consequently, many government critics including political activists, academics and writers were arbitrarily linked to the organisation and promptly incarcerated. Others were forced into exile. Mutahi later "fictionalised" his jail term in the novel *Jail Bugs*. The last novel he published before his death *Miracle Merchants* interrogates one of his pet topics, religion, looking at the Pentecostalism movement in Kenya and how it feeds on the material and spiritual desperation of most Kenyans. He also shows the scam that is hidden under the rubric of latter day evangelism. He discusses how the new evangelists engage in corruption, smuggling and other murky deals under the cover of religion.

It is however in theatre that Mutahi found his metier in later life. Theatre was one of the most covert sites of cultural production in the repressive years of the Moi administration. With the reintroduction of multi-party politics in Kenya in 1992, popular arts in Kenya in general began to experience a rebirth. Stand-up comedy popularised by street comedians in Nairobi became hugely popular while thespians began taking their work to audiences rather than only stage them in the major theatre halls in Nairobi. Mutahi was among those who inspired this 'revival' and especially the rediscovery of vernacular theatre in Kenya.[18] Mutahi's interest in theatre can be traced to his days at the University of Nairobi where he was a member of the university's 'Free Travelling Theatre'. He later joined a popular Nairobi theatre group *Sarakasi Productions* and produced and acted in several plays including *Ciaigana ni Ciaigana* (A remake of Protais Asseng's *Enough is Enough)* and *Wangu wa Makeri,* a play about the mythical woman who ruled the Agikuyu community. In 1995, Mutahi formed *Igiza* [Kiswahili for Imitate] *Productions,* a group that was to follow *c*losely in the footsteps of Ngugi's Kamĩrĩĩthu theatre.

[18] For a detailed reading on Mutahi's theatre, see Outa, 2002

Kamĩrĩĩthu theatre is a term now used to refer to the drama that was staged at the beginning of the 1980s by the peasants of Kamĩrĩĩthu. Bjorkman (1989) notes that the villagers had built a cultural centre in their village to further adult education and the arts by staging traditional plays in their own language. By using material recognised and understood by the people, this theatre "explained to them facets of society that had become unintelligible" (Bjorkman 1989: viii). According to Ndigirigi Gichingiri (1999), while with Kamĩrĩĩthu, Ngugi had 'discovered' that good productions could be staged outside the confines of the Kenya National Theatre (KNT), Kenya's most famous theatre hall. At the same time theatre was regarded "not as a physical building but a space in which there were performers, actors and an audience" (See Outa, 1999; Ndigirigi, 1999). It is after the famed Kamĩrĩĩthu theatre that artistes began performing outside 'conventional' theatre halls, some out of experiment, others because they could not afford to pay for halls such as the KNT. Bars became one of the most popular alternative venues for theatre productions. It is *Sarakasi Productions* that can be credited with the emergence of what has now become known as "Bar Theatre". The group staged most of its plays in bars and hotels around Kenya. "Bar theatre" was further popularised with the formation of Mutahi's *Igiza Productions*. Already a household name because of *Whispers,* Mutahi played to full houses. Mbugua wa Mungai (2003) notes that people would attend Mutahi's productions to see "Whispers" or 'Son of the Soil' as he was now popularly known because of his newspaper column *Whispers*. The bar also became a popular space for expression in his column *Whispers*. Most of Mutahi's plays were written in his native Gikuyu language and performed mostly in bars, venues he considered "close to the people".

But the academy was particularly hostile to this "innovation". Critics and academics saw profits as this theatre's motivation. Ndigirigi (1999), among others, complained about the scripts and the acting being "generally poor… (t)he audience (which drinks beer during the performance, with waiters

moving in between seats to take orders) is normally looking for entertaining diversion and not a quality performance. The bawdier the performances the merrier the audiences" (19). The criticism notwithstanding, the 'popular' nature of "Bar theatre", its ability speak to peoples immediate concerns and in a language they understand best has established it as artistic phenomenon in Kenya.

Some of *Igiza's* most popular productions included *Mugaathe Mubogothi,* (His Excellency the Hallucinating leader), which Mutahi co-authored with Wahome Karengo, *Mugaathe Ndotono*, *Professa Nyoori, Igooti ria Muingi* (The People's court) and *Makaririra Kioro* (They will cry in the toilet). These plays were indictments of the political regime in Kenya and one notes parallel themes and styles in *Whispers.* In one of the play's premier opening, Mutahi later said of the audiences: " … fear was etched in their faces as they watched it. As soon as it was over they would put on caps or goggles to disguise their identity and then literally flee fearing arrest and detention".[19] Mutahi's theatre productions were highly political, perhaps an influence of Ngugi's Kamĩrĩĩthu Theatre. But it is also necessary to bear in mind that Mutahi published and wrote his fiction and plays at a time when it was impossible to mute the political, for this realm was inescapably linked with the everyday.

Conclusion

This chapter has given a general background to Mutahi's work and to the emergence of popular fiction in the Kenyan popular press. The chapter attempted to locate Mutahi's fiction and especially *Whispers* within the broader intellectual, historical and literary traditions in Kenya. I have noted the role of the academy, particularly the University of Nairobi, Makerere and Ibadan universities, and of the intellectual and cultural magazines *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* in shaping East African literatures. But I have also demonstrated how pioneering works emerging from the university, which hesitantly engaged in "border operations", were later radically revised by an

[19] Interview with *Art Matters* posted at www.artmatters.info

emergent group of writers. I have argued that these writers were not entirely fathered by the 'Makerereans' or mothered by the University of Nairobi; instead they were exposed and nurtured by the Kenyan popular press. The chapter has argued that the popular press played an important role as a space for apprenticeship for many writers. I have discussed the influences of *Joe* and *Drum* magazines as well as various elements of New Journalism in fiction writing in the popular press in Kenya. I have also very tentatively looked at some of the important markers of Mutahi's work. In the concluding parts of this chapter, I have looked at Mutahi's involvement in his other interests, the novel, and theatre. One notes considerable parallels between his theatre and novels, and his newspaper column *Whispers* particularly at the level of style and themes. This chapter should however be read as an introductory overview to more detailed discussions on Mutahi and his work in the subsequent chapters.