KENYATTA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

TOWARDS A POETICS OF TONY MOCHAMA'S 'SPOKEN WORD' POETRY:
A STUDY OF WHAT IF I AM A LITERARY GANGSTER

BY

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A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
LITERATURE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF A MASTER OF ARTS
DEGREE.

JUNE, 2014
DECLARATION

This research project is my original work and has not been presented for a degree or any other purpose in this or any other University:

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my beloved son, Fidel Castro Munene, for whom I began this pursuit.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere appreciation and gratitude go to my supervisors, Dr. Mugubi John and Dr. Olembo Waveney, for their unreserved guidance, valuable ideas and close supervision so far.

To Tony Mochama and other Standard Media Group staff, my family, friends, colleagues, lecturers and all those whose efforts have directly or indirectly ensured the accomplishment of this task, my heartfelt thanks go to you. Sincerely, it is through your efforts, in your various ways, that I have achieved my target. To you all, I will forever be indebted.
ABSTRACT

Tony Mochama’s poetry, unlike other ‘spoken word’ poetry in Kenya, has attracted huge and widely divergent critical responses. While many literary critics and scholars have dismissed it, often labeling it ‘pseudo/quasi’ poetry, others have hailed its freshness and innovation. It is in light of this divergence that this study independently evaluated the literariness and poetics of his only published anthology, *What If I Am a Literary Gangster* (2007). Since the overall purpose of the research was to objectively establish its literary validity, a highly representative sample of forty-two poems was selected from the entire anthology of eighty poems. This sizeable sample, got through a systematic random sampling technique, was then textually analyzed to reveal not only the inherent thematic concerns but also a stylistic character that eventually informed the generalized appraisal of his poetry. Guided by the new criticism and reader-response theories, the research found out that despite Mochama’s transgression from some of the poetic norms, he adheres to the most definitive ones. His ability to integrate various stylistic devices in his fresh articulation of the modern issues in the society was noted. The presence of few obscure and seemingly stylistically weak poems in an anthology of eighty should not be used to wholly discredit him as a poet.
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DEFINITION OF TERMS

'Spoken Word' Poetry - The term ‘spoken word’ refers to works or performances where a person usually speaks to an audience. Therefore, ‘spoken word’ poetry is a form of poetry that is written to be read aloud. It is poetry that has a predominance of rhythmical elements where the phonetic aspects of human speech are foregrounded. Although ‘spoken word’ poetry has also been referred to as sound or performance poetry by some scholars, this research avoided the two terms due to the following reasons:

a) Sound poetry connotes a form of poetry that is of more aural than literary quality.

b) Performance poetry refers to poetry that is composed for or during a performance and that may have been with us since traditional times. Also, the term ‘performance’ connotes theatrical acts like body movement, gestures and mimicry that are often limited in the form of poetry that was the focus of this study.

'Open Mic' Sessions - These are ‘spoken word’ sessions where a host allows anyone to sign up in advance for a reading or performance of their poems although hip-hop, rap, speeches and comedies etc are also allowed.

Poetry Slam or Slam Poetry - These are ‘spoken word’ poetry competitions where poets present their works as their audience act as the judges. Later the winning piece is selected and the poet is given an award.

Poetics - This is a critical inquiry into the nature, structure and other literary techniques inherent in ‘spoken word’ poetry.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Just like any other work of art, poetry has undergone many changes and innovations. From performance-based oral poetry, came written poetry where major poets from Shakespeare through Yeats concentrated on metrical poetry that was generally in closed form. Although there still existed free verse poets, it is from the 1960s that many poets, and especially Americans, started advocating for forms that stay open complaining that the earlier closed form is a 'straight-jacketing' model that limits free expression and creativity.

1.1.1 Development of 'Spoken Word' Poetry

Before the advent of print media, there only existed performance poetry that was specifically composed for or during a performance before an audience. With writing and printing in place, a new form of poetry that was composed in writing on paper emerged. This drastically changed the poet’s role from being a performer to a source of written texts for his/her audience’s private reading. This latter-day arrival went on to gain prominence with its predecessor being relegated to oral literature where it is generally viewed, especially by young elites, as a lesser poetry compared to the written one.

In the early years of the 20th Century, there emerged poets who renewed the earlier emphasis of poetry on sound. Robert Pinsky (39th Poet Laureate of the USA) for example argued that a well written poem is that which is written with consideration of the voice.
To him and others like Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky (qtd. in Charters 1997), there was a need to link poetry with drama and other performance arts. This would give back to poetry its earlier life and popularity. It is these campaigns that saw the proliferation of such poetry and the term ‘spoken word’ poetry was therefore coined in the 1980s to describe the live and audio recordings of poems.

The 21st Century, with its technological advancement and new social realities, has seen poetry spread from texts and anthologies to a wider audience through public performances, television, radio and online transmissions. Besides going to libraries and bookshops to access poetry, one may now visit a cyber cafe or even use his/her internet-enabled phone to not only download and upload favourite poems but also enjoy their performances. Also, over the years, there has been an increasing number of ‘spoken word’ poetry venues and festivals in Kenya. It is in such that a paying audience gathers to listen to various poets as they perform their poems. These usually huge gatherings of poetry enthusiasts sit for hours as they enjoy performance after performance from different poets and other ‘open mic’ artists such as rappers, hip-hoppers and comedians. Examples of such ‘spoken word’ poetry sessions and venues in Kenya are ‘Kwani? Open Mic’ held every first Tuesday of the month at Club Soundd along Kaunda Street (Nairobi), Silver Bird Poets Club held every Tuesday at Silver Bird Movie Theatre situated near Nakumatt Junction (Nairobi), Poetry at Discovery held every Saturday at Discovery Restaurant along Koinange Street (Nairobi), Bar Stool Poetry Night held every second and last Thursday of the month at Giggles Restaurant (Nairobi), and Wamathai ‘Spoken Word’ held every Thursday of the month at Secrets Lounge, opposite View-Park.
Towers (Nairobi).

Apart from live performances in these and other joints in Nairobi, there are a lot of slam and ‘spoken word’ poetry audiovisuals online. ‘Storymoja’, for example, does poetry online in addition to its annual ‘Hay Festival’ in Nairobi. Leading poetry bloggers like Njeri Wangari, Wamathai, and Keguro Macharia have sites such as www.kenyanpoets.blogspot.com, www.wamathai.com and www.keguromacharia.wordpress.com respectively where they not only post their poems, reviews and poetry updates but also give space and room to upcoming poets who would otherwise not be heard. Other avenues where ‘spoken word’ poetry dominates are the annual ‘Kwani?’s Litfest’ and ‘Jukwaani’ Festival for Performance Literature. It is here that Kenyan ‘spoken word’ poets have met and interacted with the world of ‘spoken word’ poetry. As a result, many have received international recognition. An example is Ngwatilo Mawiyoo who presents her works at festivals across Africa and Europe.

Although many ‘spoken word’ poets have not published their works, there is an increase in poetry book publications in Kenya. In 2010 alone, several poetry anthologies were published. These include, Blue Mother-tongue by Ngwatilo Mawiyoo, Mines and Mind Fields: My Spoken Words by Njeri Wangari, Lilac Uprising: Poems for the City and other Places by Phyllis Muthoni, Bittersweet: The Pain and Joy of Being by Elizabeth Orchardson, Nest of Stones by Wanjoji wa Makokha and How to Euthanise a Cactus by Stephen Partington. Most of these poets are key figures in the development and popularization of ‘spoken word’ poetry in Kenya.
1.1.2 Tony Mochama’s Poetry

Tony Mochama, aka ‘Smitta,’ is a journalist working with Standard Group Limited’s **Pulse Magazine** (Nairobi). He is also a popular ‘spoken word’ poet in Nairobi whose anthology, *What If I Am a Literary Gangster* (2007) is one of the earliest ‘spoken word’ poetry anthologies to be published. Its sequel, *The Literary Gangster II* awaits publication.

Apart from participating in many international ‘spoken word’ poetry festivals, Mochama also lectures on creative writing and poetry. In June 2010, for example, he was a guest speaker at Concordia University in Montreal. Though a law graduate from the University of Nairobi, Mochama is a common figure in Literature corridors and gatherings. Even before publishing his anthology, he was known for his public performances of poetry especially courtesy of ‘Kwani?’ Trust that is closely involved in nurturing talents in creative writing and literature. This prolific poet, novelist and journalist has also written such other prose titles as *Princess Adhis* (2011), *Naija Coca Broda* (2011), and *The Road to Eldoret* (2009). His latest novel, *Meet the Omtitas* (2012) was a finalist in the year 2013 Burt Award for African Literature. Despite these strides in prose, it is the controversy that his poetry attracted, when for example one critic referred to him as a ‘literary gangster’, which informed the choice of Mochama as the focus of this study.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Tony Mochama’s poetry has attracted huge and widely divergent critical responses where some critics have dismissed it as ‘pseudo’ poetry while others have praised its freshness
and innovation. In light of this divergent criticism, this study independently assessed the poetry’s stylistic and thematic character hence objectively ascertained its literary validity. This was intended to contribute towards a more objective and clear appreciation of this popular poetry.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the research were to:

i. Examine the general stylistic character of Tony Mochama’s poetry.

ii. Establish his key thematic concerns.

iii. Assess the uniqueness of the poetry against the backdrop of established poetic norms.

1.4 Research Questions

i. What is the general stylistic character of Tony Mochama’s poetry?

ii. What are his key thematic concerns?

iii. How unique is his poetry in relation to the established poetic norms?

1.5 Research Assumptions

i. Tony Mochama’s poetry has a discernible stylistic character

ii. His poetry has various thematic concerns

iii. The stylistic character of his poetry is unique in relation to the established poetic norms.
1.6 Justification of the Research

Though relatively new in Kenya, ‘spoken word’ poetry has become very popular. Despite this popularity, little has been done in terms of its stylistic and thematic appraisal. It is this realization that informed this study’s focus on one of the earliest published spoken word poets in Kenya.

Tony Mochama’s works, though mostly accessed in print form, fall under ‘spoken word’ poetry. Being a frequent performer in various avenues, most of his poems in the anthology were composed and performed before they were finally published. He confirms this in his introduction to the anthology, where he thanks June Wanjiru Wainaina of ‘Kwani?’ Literary Journal for letting him “yodel at the Club Soundd Tuesday evenings, every month”. It is the content of this ‘yodeling’ that finally formed the anthology. It should be noted that even those poems that he may have changed or published before performing, were composed with performance in mind. There was actually an oral preview of the entire anthology at ‘Kwani’?’s Club Soundd poetry sessions four days before its launch.

Although Mochama has published prose, it is his poetry that has attracted huge negative as well as positive criticism even prompting Ngunjiri, a reknowned critic, to compare him with the controversial Taban Lo Liyong. It is this popularity and the divided criticism that informed this study’s choice of his poetry as its case study. This study, therefore, assessed and ascertained the distinctive stylistic character of Tony Mochama’s poetry in light of the contradictory critical responses it had attracted. This was to contribute
towards a poetics of his and the general ‘spoken word’ poetry in Kenya hence its appreciation and recognition.

1.7 Scope and Limitation of the Study

Although one ought to deal not only with the published works but also live performance and video recordings of the same for thorough analysis and objective evaluation of ‘spoken word’ poetry, currently there exists no video recording of Tony Mochama’s poetry in performance. Moreover, the research avoided working with video recording of performances. This was in consideration of Foley’s (2005) postulation that a tape-recorded text has extraneous data that vary with each recording and that can affect interpretation. In tape-records, dramatic and performative elements come to the fore hence affecting the poem’s meaning. Therefore, this study preferred textual elucidation of a printed form which is stable, fixed and unified. Despite this, many ‘spoken word’ presentations emphasize sound as opposed to drama. Most ‘spoken word’ poets, including Mochama, read from their scripts or published works. What matters here is that these works were originally composed with performance in mind. The choice of Mochama’s works as the representative of ‘spoken word’ poetry was made after the researcher attended some of his performances and realized that he mostly reads from scripts or his anthology.

1.8 Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the following two theories:

1. New criticism theory
2. Reader-response theory
New Criticism Theory


New criticism theory emphasizes close reading, particularly of poetry, with close attention being given to individual words, syntax, imagery, rhythm among others. Criticism under this theory is basically about looking at the literary work on the basis of what is written and not its context, author or his/her biographical issues. To the new critics, a text is a self-contained, autonomous, aesthetic object whose structure should never be examined separately from the meaning. The text, and the literary devices that make it, are the sole determinants of its meaning. To the new critics, importation of meanings from outside the text is irrelevant and potentially distracting.

Though new criticism's divorcing of the text from its immanent context has widely been criticized, it is the best theory to apply in analysis and evaluation of poetry and especially in this study where it was the poetics and literary quality of the text that was in question. Poetry, even by its very density and comprehensive nature, requires one to pay close attention to its linguistic and paralinguistic details.

Although some poets sacrifice form at the altar of content, it should be realized that form and content symbiotically exist in poetry. Form acts as the skeleton on which content is
supported and carried to the consumers. Therefore to successfully and objectively measure a poem’s achievement, fidelity to its language and structure is important. One is required to exclusively look at the poet’s exploitation of diction, imagery, syntax and, above all, sound. It is by doing this that one eliminates the tendency to appraise a poem according to his/her interpretation, his/her cultural, moral and aesthetic values and at times, the name and fame of the poet in question.

In this research therefore, new criticism theory guided the independent assessment of the general stylistic character of Tony Mochama’s poetry. It also helped in pinpointing his digressions from and conformity to the established poetic norms such as sound and imagery devices. This, in turn, informed its appraisal.

**Reader-Response Theory**

Reader-response theory, also referred to as transactional theory, emerged in the 1970s. Its main proponents are Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, David Bleich, Norman Holland, Jan P. Tompkin, and Hans-Robert Jauss (Coombes 1987). Though each of these proponents has different views, they all raise the question, where does literary meaning reside, in the text, the reader or in the interactive space between text and reader?

This theory contrasts not only with the first theory that primarily focuses on the text but also with other theories. It argues that Literature should be viewed as a performing art in which each reader creates his or her own unique performance. According to Wolfgang Iser (qtd. in Bleich 1978), readers actualize texts by filling in their gaps or “indeterminacies of meaning” as he called them. To him, a work of art is not and can
never be a self-contained entity no matter how complete or adequate it seems. There are always gaps that make it a skeleton that needs to be filled in with ‘meat’ from the world of the readers to become complete and whole. Readers who meet a text armed with a lot of expectations, assumptions and values, will always go beyond it, drawing inferences and evaluating it in terms of their own experiences, concerns and historical circumstances. This therefore means that the meanings that readers derive from the text may be as varied as the readers. Also, an individual reader’s interpretation of a text may change, and in many instances, it has changed over time.

A poem that one reads or listens to today may elicit a very different meaning when the same person reads or listens to it some years or months later. It is this fact that has made interpretation to be not the art of construing but constructing meaning with readers from different generations, geographical areas, eras and circumstances interpreting and appreciating literary works differently hence the subjectivity and plurality of meanings and responses in literature.

According to DiYanni (2000), even though we can discuss ideas in a poem, it can never be reduced to its intellectual content. Poems present experiences in language and therefore it is these experiences that the poet creates for the readers or listeners to re-create. In our re-creations, we make our own interpretations and sometimes the total meaning of a poem evades even the poet who wrote it.

Other proponents of this theory like David Bleich (1978) see the literary text as a kind of mirror in which readers see themselves. He is supported in this by Norman Holland
who argues that every reader creates a specific identity theme unique to him or herself while reading any literary text. According to him, to make sense of the literary work, readers must find in it or create through the process of reading it their identity themes. This changes readers from being passive recipients to active contributors in the creative process. This is especially so in ‘spoken word’ poetry where audience actively participate in the rendition. The regular repetition of a line or two, common in ‘spoken word’ poetry, may arouse the audience into joining the performer in his or her recitation.

Poetry by its very nature calls readers to go beyond what is explicitly stated. Its imagery and economy of words require one to draw inferences as well as enrich the text with personal knowledge and experiences. In its interpretation and evaluation, one is forced to heavily borrow from conventions, personal beliefs and values as well as interest. Poetry is said to be revelational not because it reveals its meaning to a reader but due to its ability to stir emotions and arouse different feelings in different people. It is these feelings that drive one into thinking and building of mental pictures that are within his or her worldview, experiences and environment. This means that a poem, no matter how detailed and direct it is, will elicit different responses from its consumers based on their worlds. It is these myriad responses that should be taken into account for any objective evaluation of a poem.

Though it seems to contradict new critics’ theory, reader-response theory’s key tenets of variability, plurality and subjectivity of responses to the same literary text are what made it suitable for this study. The theory accommodated, explained and informed the analysis
of the numerous differing views and critical responses that Tony Mochama’s poetry has elicited. It further justified the research’s development of its own independent standpoint on the same. Whereas the new critics theory dealt with the form aspect of the poetry, this theory complemented it in as far as the content and the responses are concerned. This enabled the achievement of the study’s stated objectives.

1.9 Literature Review

1.9.1 Introduction

Since this study was about assessing the literary quality of a form of poetry, a brief review of what poetry is generally deemed to be, its universally acknowledged elements, and its general classification was important before embarking on the review of the available literature on Tony Mochama’s poetry.

1.9.2 Definition of Poetry

Poetry has continuously eluded efforts to define it. From Aristotle in his book, Poetics, to modern poets and critics, it has attracted as many definitions as there are people defining it. A look at many of these definitions leaves one more confused on what is and what is not poetry. Perhaps after sensing this confusion, Michael Meyer (2001) advised those interested in understanding the full meaning of poetry to seek it in the open sea of experience where poetry is rather than in exclusionary definitions.

Many poets have said a lot about their art. True to their calling, some have used the very medium of poetry to define it. Archibald MacLeish in his poem, ‘Ars Poetica’ (1926) ends with a line, “A poem should not mean / but be” (26 – 27). By this, he meant that one
will know what a poem is by experiencing the real poem itself. Definitions are of little help. One only needs to study a poem and will not need to be told whether it is poetry or not. Good poetry is to be heard or read for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest in meaning. Elements such as sounds, images, rhythms, figures of speech may strike and please us even before we ask, but what does it all mean?

Marianne Moore in her poem, ‘Poetry’ (1921, 1935) says that poetry is ‘A place for the genuine’ (6-7) where ordinary things, real-life experiences are presented in a new and refreshing manner to arouse and stir genuine emotions never felt before. To her, great poetry is the path towards the discovery of the extra-ordinaries of the ordinary. She ends her poem by cautioning poets not to be, ‘So derivative as to / become / unintelligible’ (15-17). This means the bottom line in poetry writing is to expunge those inner emotions by communicating them to others. One’s poems ought not to be as obscure and complex as to hinder that communication.

The above positions from different poets have been summed up by W.H. Auden (1939) who demands two things before a piece of writing can qualify to be a poem. One, it must be a well-made verbal object that does honour to the language in which it is composed or written. Two, it must say something significant about a reality common to us but perceived from a unique perspective. By these assertions, Auden is emphasizing the orality of poetry and its uniqueness in language and perspective. He is supported by Lawrence (1956) who says that poetry is a special language that says more and says it more intensively. Though it may talk of common-place things and happenings, it assumes
such a refreshing angle that one is left gasping for more.

To compose such a work, it takes time, keen observation and a high level of creativity. Poets have confessed to have taken even years to write a single poem. For one to unravel and savour the beauty in such a work, one must approach it with the dexterity and devotion that created it. Combing it for analysis of all its formal elements is the best way to arrive at its meaning and achievement.

With poetry demanding so much from the poets and their audience alike, the controversy on what constitutes good poetry and bad poetry does not seem to end soon. Poets will always defend their works as their audiences judge them depending on their understanding. In view of this, Edwin Arlington Robinson’s (1931) observation is quite in order. He said, “Poetry has two outstanding characteristics. One is that it is indefinable. The other is that it is eventually unmistakable” (62). What is unmistakable in poetry is its concentrated use of language. Each word carries heavy meanings, experiences, emotions and effects: it is chosen not only for its meaning but sound too.

Robinson’s view notwithstanding, it is important to note that the way poetry has been defined over time has changed as society and poetry itself changes. Nevertheless, there exist poetic elements without which a work cannot be regarded as poetry.

1.9.3 Universal Elements of Poetry

Though creative writers have a licence to manipulate their works the way they deem best, each genre of literature has its conventions within which it has to operate. In poetry, apart
from lines and stanzas, there are a number of universally acknowledged means to it. Of these elements, the most commonly used can be broadly categorized into two: phonological and figures of speech features.

1.9.4 Phonological Features

These are aspects of orality that give a poem its rhythm. They are further divided into two. There are those that can be marked graphologically like alliteration and rhyme and those appreciated through hearing otherwise called supra-segmentals.

1.9.5 Figures of Speech

Although ‘spoken word’ poetry has predominance of sound, it does not in any way disregard other literary devices. Figures of speech, also known as imagery, are those features that create mental pictures in the minds of the poetry readers or listeners. They are similes, metaphors, onomatopoeia among others.

It is the presence or absence of the above two categories of poetic features and their effectiveness that is considered when evaluating the general stylistic character of a poem.

1.9.6 Classification of Poetry

Poetry can be classified either thematically, stylistically or even by its mode of transmission. Pfeiler (2003) uses mode of transmission to classify poets as follows:

i. The ‘Pagers’

These are poets who purely write for the page. Theirs is a written poetry that is solely transmitted to its audience through the print media.
ii. The ‘Page-stagers’

These are poets who write for print but at times may read their published works aloud for an audience as a way of marketing those works or just for fun. Although they present their poems in a well-articulated way which brings much of the meaning to the fore, or adds meaning in the overall perception of the poems, these printed poems also work well for the silent recipient whose auditory imagination is well trained. Dylan Thomas and T.S. Eliot are examples of the ‘page-stagers’.

iii. The ‘Stagers’

These write poems to purely perform them. They include the contemporary ‘spoken word’ poets who have been credited with reclaiming poetry as a spoken art actualized through performance. The ‘stagers’ use the stage as the page, transforming poetry readings into theatrical events. While the recent resurgence of ‘spoken word’ poetry is seen as a reaction against mainstream, print-based poetry, the style takes us back to the classic role of the poet, who recited, chanted or sang notable happenings, emotions, and perceptions on occasion. While traditional poets utilized standard structures, in part, to serve as mnemonic devices, contemporary ‘spoken word’ poets call upon experimental rhythms as a means to engage their audience in the listening experience.

Gray (1986) attributes the origin and rise of this form of poetry in USA to poets that include James Russell, Henry Wadsworth, Robert Frost, Edgar Allan Poe and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Their poetry gained popularity not just because it was performed but also for its handling of everyday subject-matter often using material that titillates the
audience. Glazner (2000) calls this form of poetry, ‘sound’ or ‘spoken word’ poetry although he classifies it further to include ‘slam poetry’ that is a cross between poetry reading and competition where judges picked randomly from the audience to rate the performances. The recent growth of ‘spoken word’ poetry can be attributed to the popularity of this slam, which has grown to a movement dedicated to creating real-time discourse between the performer and his or her audience, coupled with other ‘spoken word’ efforts. While ‘spoken word’ poetry cannot be categorized, for example, as a sonnet or a haiku, it has its uniqueness that bears in mind the presence of a listening or (and) watching audience. It is an inclusive art form that invites all people to participate, whether as a poet, audience member, or a judge.

iv. The ‘On-stagers’

‘On-stagers’ orally compose spontaneously during a performance and only later transcribe and publish. There are very few poets in this category. It is mostly free-style hip-hoppers who can fit in this classification.

The ‘page-stager’, the ‘stager’ and the ‘on-stager’ are all ‘spoken word’ poets. It is only their levels of performance that differ. The ‘page-stager’ mainly emphasizes sound while the other two may flavour their renditions with physical body actions.

1.9.7 A Critical Exploration of the Divergent Responses to Mochama’s Poetry

Long before Mochama published his anthology, What If I Am a Literary Gangster in 2007, his poems had already appeared in the annual ‘Kwani’? Literary Journal, Sunday Standard newspaper’s literary discourse page, poetry blogs and many other on-line
avenues. He also used to recite most of his poems during the monthly ‘kwani’? Trust organized open ‘mic’ sessions at Club Soundd in Nairobi. Therefore, even as early as 2005, Mochama’s poetry, having appeared in the above avenues, had started attracting controversy. Together with other ‘kwani’?-affiliated writers, Mochama became a subject of attacks and counter-attacks from both renowned and upcoming critics, creative and non-creative writers and any other who had access to either the Sunday Standard newspaper or the various literary ‘blogospheres’ where the debate raged.

Immediately after he launched his What If I AM a Literary Gangster (2007) anthology at the Goethe Institute (Nairobi), Tony Mochama attracted a lot of attention. His poetry divided critics in the middle with one school maintaining that Tony Mochama’s kind of writing should be encouraged and the other not even considering it as Literature. Old school critics like Egara Kabaji and Chris Wanjala trashed the work with Kabaji describing it as rebellious ‘scribbling and musings’ (qtd. in wordpress.com). To them, his work is not serious in its approach to serious issues. According to Egara Kabaji, Mochama’s are, ‘Not the conventional neatly trimmed lines rich in meaning and social concern, as Okot p’Bitek’s or Jared Angira’s (qtd. in otienoamisi.wordpress.com). Although this might be true, Kabaji ought to have realized that literary reputations and what is valued as great literature change over time and in the eyes of the readers. The current so called ‘bling bling’ generation may not even appreciate works by Okot p’Bitek or Jared Angira that Kabaji is praising for according to them, the two belong to the old ways of doing things. Actually, the disparaged Clementina in p’Bitek’s ‘Song of Lawino’ may be viewed as a heroine and a role-model by the majority of this generation. This
happens as a result of the inevitability of change that p'Bitek himself appreciated when he observed that his poetry’s value would not last for long.

The launch further elicited heated debates like never before in the literary ‘blogospheres’. At maishayetu.com, critics tear into each other over Mochama’s poetry. While Kabaji is categorical that such works should not be allowed into a classroom, other critics like Munene wa Mumbi and Otieno Otieno agree that though it is an ‘exhibitionist verse’, it is not so often that, “Literary clowns like Mochama enjoy such unflattering reviews”. The new generation of critics and poetry lovers has viewed Tony Mochama’s works positively. Apart from fellow performance poets, critics like Otieno Amisi, Tom Odhiambo, Joseph Ngunjiri and John Mwazemba have hailed Mochama’s experimentation with language with his type of approach being viewed as a new dawn in the poetry scene in Kenya. To Ngunjiri, Mochama’s poetry is “refreshingly real and could only come from someone who has been through much” (www.jngunjiri.wordpress.com).

In an article appearing in the Sunday Standard of September 4, 2005 titled, “The Kwani? Generation’s Dilution of Literature,” Munene wa Mumbi accuses Mochama and his ilk of being journalistic in their literary attempts. According to Wa Mumbi, Mochama and other ‘Kwanists’ have deliberately taken journalistic methods to appeal to their audience hence substituting literariness and subtlety with sensationalism and “unrefined rebellion while purporting to think outside the box”. He takes issue with Mochama’s poem on Kamlesh Pattni that had appeared in ‘kwani’?s third issue where he equates it to “any
letter to the editors on the same in the local dailies”. He goes on to castigate this generation of writers for dwelling on trivial and “matatu inspired poetry” while there are great happenings and serious issues waiting to be highlighted in creative works.

In making these assertions, Wa Mumbi ignores the fact that good poetry can be created or composed on anything including what he refers to as trivial. It is the dexterity, creativity and the ingenuity involved in transforming the ordinary that matters. Although the seriousness and the topicality of the issues expressed in one’s poetry are important, it is the poetry’s aesthetic quality and the craftsmanship involved in its creation that appeal to the audience. Wa Mumbi ought to know that poetry is more of a source of pleasure than of information. We read it basically for the same reasons we listen to a song whose words we may not even understand. Enjoyment, delight and satisfaction are the main driving forces to poetry for it is not only a method of communication but also a unique experience where poets endeavour to create new and unique impressions and perspectives of the ordinary. The Oryx mystery and the extra-ordinary case of the dog that rescued a baby that Wa Mumbi advises Mochama to highlight in his poetry may have constituted great breaking news but not necessarily great poetry. According to Meyer (2001), in poetry, it is not so much about ‘what’ but ‘how’ it is expressed. Wa Mumbi’s tagging of Mochama’s poetry as journalistic and sentimental is not in the very least illustrated with any concrete textual evidence to support the tag. This same poem that he calls a “letter to the editors” is hailed in the same newspaper page a month later where Asego refers to it as a masterpiece full of creativity and humour.
In a terse reply to Wa Mumbi titled, "What’s Wrong with ‘Kwanism’?" that appeared in the *Sunday Standard* of October 30, 2005, Mochama dismissed Wa Mumbi’s argument as a rant “which has no discernible substantive argument or demonstrable critical wherewithal to undergird the wild sweep of his overheated rhetoric”. In defense of his poem on Kamlesh Pattni, Mochama quotes some lines from his other poem titled ‘poetry police’ that defends and justifies his transgression. He goes ahead to agree with Wa Mumbi’s castigation of the older generation of writers where he even makes it worse by derisively referring to Chris Wanjala and other critics of his generation as “dinosaurs who have become increasingly irrelevant... in Kenyan Literature”. According to Mochama, ‘Kwani’? was the only active literary engagement in the country that deserved credit for producing two Caine Prize winners. The revolutionary journal which was then in its 7th issue had done a lot in featuring and nurturing the young talents. The annual ‘Kwani? Lit Fest’ that brought together various major writers to nurture and mentor others coupled with the monthly ‘kwani’? Trust open ‘mic’ sessions had done a great deal in Kenyan contemporary literature.

Although Mochama’s passionate defense of ‘Kwani’? is not a surprise as it is the one that catapulted him to literary limelight, his generalized attack of older writers and critics as dinosaurs is wrong. Literary discussions and arguments should not be personalized. One would also agree with Wa Mumbi that although the establishment of ‘Kwani’? open ‘mic’ sessions brought a degree of openness that liberated artistic expressions and avenues it may have also encouraged mediocrity. The eventual proliferation of poetry venues in Nairobi that ‘Kwani’? encouraged and their publication of non-conventional
literature may have contributed in undermining the essence of poetry through breakdown of the rules that define it. Many critics have argued that some of the poems presented in these avenues may not be up to the standards of poetry. It is this, and its association with controversial writers like Mochama, which has made ‘Kwani’? a subject of discussions and arguments in and outside literary circles. Also, like any other new idea, the initiative was bound to attract all sorts of reactions and reviews depending on the reviewers’ standpoint.

One of ‘Kwani’?'s strongest critics is Egara Kabaji. Though in an article in the *Sunday Standard* of November 13, 2005, he agrees that “the proliferation of alternative media such as ‘Kwani’? offers a parallel discursive arena where members of hitherto nondescript group invent and circulate counter discourses,” he takes issue with this generation of writers’ “gangster approach to literary criticism”. He accuses them of juvenile tendencies, pride and egotism. In this and many other subsequent articles in the same newspaper, he attacks this group that he variously refers to as “bling bling writers, literary gangsters, kwanists and literary rebels,” for being full of arrogance and fascination with “false signifiers of success”. In one of the articles titled, “Food for Thought for Literary Gangsters” appearing in the *Sunday Standard* of April 16, 2006, he accuses them of building their careers by attacking their predecessors in creative writing. He claims that all these upcoming writers are full of self-admiration and pride that comes after they have “published a story on one of the rarely visited internet sites or in ‘Kwani’? Magazine”. He goes on to single out Mochama whom he regards as a heckler whose outbursts are precipitated by his literary shallowness and poor grasp of literary theory,
history and criticism. Kabaji’s frequent calls for emerging writers to learn creative writing are later countered by Okemwa in an article appearing in the *Sunday Standard* of April 6, 2008 titled, “Poets Compose Not Through Learning But Inspiration”.

Though Kabaji may have been infuriated by Mochama’s personal attacks, he goes overboard where he regards new writers, irrespective of the quality of their writing, as ‘upstarts’, ‘gangsters’ and ‘nondescripts’ for a writer has to begin somewhere. Innovation in literary writing should be encouraged for we have romantic, realistic, modern and post-modern literary movements courtesy of writers who dared to think ‘outside the box’. Literature constantly evolves as new movements emerge to speak to the concerns of different generations of people and historical periods.

While responding to Kabaji, the ‘Kwani’? ’s founder, Binyavanga Wainaina asserts his recognition of the “new forms, new ways of expression as well as different viewpoints” that Kabaji had condemned as ‘gangsterish.’ In a highly satirical article that appeared in the *Sunday Standard* of November 27, 2005, he regards Kabaji and his generation of critics as “self-appointed gate-keepers” who are full of ‘don’ts’, ‘should nots’ and pronouncement of ‘purities’ and ‘authenticities’ that have no place in the dynamic world of creative writing. He goes ahead to laud the ‘kwanists’” pioneer spirit, innovation and open-mindedness in their creative endeavours. The ensuing debate about ‘Kwani’? and ‘Kwanist’ writing that bordered on personality attacks and generational conflict attracted many more voices. Chris Wanjala, while praising ‘Kwani’? ’s contributors for taking Kenya’s literary tradition to a new level, took issue with Mochama’s lashing out of the
older generation of writers and critics. In an article titled, "Literature Must Anchor Itself in the Past to Have a Future" appearing in the *Sunday Standard* of November 6, 2005, he opined that artistic talent should not be pegged on age. He advised young and old writers and critics to work together as literature must anchor itself to the past. The age rhetoric was further condemned by many other contributors to the paper’s literary discourse page among them Antony Mutua who in an article "It’s Nauseating this Age Rhetoric" appearing in November 6, 2005 paper advised the young writers and critics to appreciate the heritage and sweat of generations past. According to him, ‘Kwani’? would become a good initiative for the Kenyan literary scene if it blended the contemporary and the classical.

In *Sunday Standard* of November 13, 2005, a regular contributor in its literary discourse page, Samuel Kimaru, blamed the contention between the new writers and the old critics for discouraging the emergence of more new writers and new art forms since these newcomers may fear that they may not measure up to the critical standards such critics set. He advised all critics to be open-minded and allow “the dynamism of art and the life it reflects”. According to him, our critical standards should accommodate new artistic creations and innovations.

In another article, “The Portrait of a literary Scholar” appearing in the *Sunday Standard* of April 23, 2006, Kabaji appears to defend his generalized attack of Mochama’s poetry where he describes his approach to literary criticism thus:
Whenever I read a work of imagination I am filled with ideas about its merits and demerits and having formed them, I hold those views with strong conviction. I therefore have to defend them, drawing not only on evidence from the text but also from the literary history that is part and parcel of any literary scholar.

A look at Kabaji’s treatises on Mochama’s work shows little of this “evidence from the text” but a lot of “drawing from the literary history”. Perhaps it is this drawing from literary history that prevents him from appreciating transgression from literary traditions as an aspect of creativity. In the same article, he goes on to betray himself where he argues that, “To a committed literary scholar, all sorts of things communicate. The conjecture of the title, name of author, the publisher, all speak telling the scholar all sorts of things.” According to him, “Literary scholars are armed with historical and cultural and literacy facts that they drop back to all the time.

Due to his perceived bias in literary criticism, Kabaji is seriously bashed by Mwenda wa Micheni. In the Sunday Standard of April 9, 2006 article by the title “Raw Emptiness Pervades Kabaji’s Literary Debates,” Wa Micheni castigates him for celebrating “Nderitu’s ramblings in the name of poetry” while trashing real poets indulging in real poetry. He accuses him of literary ignorance and failure to appreciate the emerging experimental artistry. These sentiments were later echoed by Callagahn Kemoli who on the same page in a July 2, 2006 newspaper said, “old school critics of Literature are blind or have closed their eyes to new trends therefore cannot see anything in other literatures except that which they were taught during their day”. In doing this, they manipulate new
writers where they assess their works against “their dichotomies into conformity”. Here, Kemoli is emphasizing individuality, diversity and innovation in creative writing since different times, individuals and places come with different aesthetic and critical concepts.

It is this gradual breakdown of the old poetics that Warren and Welleck (1949) encourages. According to the duo, art, being fundamentally irrational, should be left to individual appreciation. Critics ought to avoid the anarchy of norms and respect perspectivism in literary works. The continuous shift of interests and tastes in literary appreciation as espoused by the reader-response theory should guide any literary appraisal and assessment. This may increase the creative repertoire hence becoming the panacea to the literary desertification of East Africa that Taban lo Liyong once alluded to.

This is further supported by Silas Nyanchwani in his article, “Why There Are Few Ngugi, Achebe Successors” appearing in the Sunday Nation, of December 16, 2012. In this article, he blames the “rigid pedantic and didactic form” in which Literature is taught in our schools today for the dearth of natural successors to African great writers of yore like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o among others. This envisaged flexibility in literary criticism does not mean condoning a laissez faire form of writing but a call to critics not to be slaves of conventions since it is the transgression from these norms that is the hallmark of creative writing.

Mochama himself agrees that, “there is good, bad and non-poetry”. In the Sunday Standard of November 4, 2007 article, “Learning to Experience ‘Real’ Poetry in Totality”, he optimistically predicts that his yet to be released collection would amuse his audience with some comic poems that feature animals but when he finally launched this
anthology, *What if I Am a Literary Gangster* on November 10, 2007, the old debate about the poetics of his poetry was rekindled. The first salvo was fired by John Mwazemba in the *Sunday Standard* of November 18, 2007 article where he highlights Mochama’s breaking of poetry rules. With textual illustrations, he shows how Mochama immerses himself in nostalgic recollections as he exploits the poetic license to “unfiltered imagination”. While predicting misunderstanding that may face Mochama’s poetry because of its reflective and personalized nature, he gives it credit where he compares Mochama with other revolutionary poets like Jack O’Gorman Sammon and Claude Mackay. Mwazemba ends his article by lauding Mochama for “daring to walk on uncharted territory”. This positive response to Mochama’s now published poetry precipitated heated discussions and debates not only in the same newspaper page but also in the blogosphere and other literary circles.

In an article titled, “*It Is Time to Look Beyond the River*” appearing in the December 9, 2007 *Sunday Standard*, Mochama divides the Kenyan literary writers into three groups namely: the pre-1977 literary elite (The ‘Thiong’oists”), the 1978-2000 group and the post-millennium writers (‘Kwanites”). As a member of the latter, he aspires to be “The Taban Lo Liyong-ish poetic figure, with an irreverence for convention and poetic style that I feel speaks strongly to the post-independence generation”. According to him, the anthology *What If I Am a Literary Gangster?* (2007) spoke strongly to the then young generation’s souls and brains. In the following *Sunday Standard*, Mundia Mundia penned a rejoinder in which he termed Mochama’s anthology as a mundane, untethered work. He equates Mochama to a rebel “due to his literary violence that is against a
seemingly stable pe-millenial ideology”. Mundia predicts doom in the literary world if people peg their literary hopes on the likes of Mochama.

In an article in the *Sunday Standard* of February 17, 2008 titled “Critics Divided As ‘Gangsters’ Invade the Literary Scene,” Otieno Amisi summarizes most of the reactions and standpoints on Mochama’s poetry up to the time of his (Amisi’s) writing the article. A look at some of these claims that Amisi documents shows that although some may be valid, majority are unjustifiable, un-illustrated and only exhibit the height of contradictions and shallowness of these divergent responses as has already been observed. However, Egara Kabaji’s argument that Mochama’s verses are decidedly defiant and rebellious is in a way validated by Mochama’s seeming aversion to criticism. The poem ‘What if I Am a Literary Gangster’ from which the anthology got its title had first appeared in the *Sunday Standard* of March 18, 2007 while the poem ‘Poetry Police’ had appeared in ‘Kwani’?3 published in the year 2005. These poems and others like, ‘Formulating Metaphors’ appear to be Mochama’s efforts to justify and defend his form of poetry. The poems, coming at a time when there was a big debate on his transgressions of poetic norms, exhibit an unjustified personal assertion and declamation that smacks of impunity in creative writing.

Nevertheless, although Mochama may be guilty as charged by Kabaji above, his accusation of him as a word juggler devoid of theme and artistic flair contradicts the fact that poetry is constructed of words placed in a specific relationship to one another. This placing of specific words in a specific order will require a master juggler to get the best
words in their best order. The resultant one-of-a-kind relationship of words creates a complexity of meaning that cannot be reproduced by any other combination of words. This is the distinctiveness that defines Mochama’s poetic style and therefore the ‘word-juggling’ that he is accused of enhances rather than dilutes his poetry. Kabaji’s assessment of Mochama’a poetry appears to be patronizing, biased and informed by superficial prejudice. A critical look at his assertions in many of his articles portrays a Kabaji who seems to have had a very negative first impression of anything associated with ‘Kwani’? Apart from his adducing of very few and contestable illustrations from the text itself, his condescending attitude towards ‘Kwani’? is also evidenced by the oscillations of his standpoints and the contradictions in most of his articles and other critical writings. An instance of such contradiction is exhibited in an article he penned in the *Sunday Standard* of March 11, 2008 titled, “Vibrant Associations Could Champion Writers Rights”. Here, he advises the Writers Association of Kenya (WAK) to “think outside the box and reflect on new ways of doing things”. According to him, the association should also champion the rights of writers for free expression and fight all manner of censorship that hampers creativity. It should also help to link Kenyan writers with other writers internationally by getting affiliated to other organizations world over. Since this is exactly what ‘kwani’? Trust does, one is left wondering why Kabaji attacks it while celebrating Writers Association of Kenya.

Stephen Derwent Partington, in an article in *Saturday Nation* of February 9, 2013 blames the war on ‘Kwani’? on colonial cultural imperialism that began with F.R. Leavis’ moral formalism theory that gave ‘right-minded academics’ power to sense the literary quality
of a work. According to him, ‘Kwani’? is a “canon-busting movement” that is geared towards a thorough reformation of Euro-American canon of texts. He louds the ‘Kwanites’ for “writing the world as it presently appears to them”. Kabaji had unfortunately positioned himself as one of the above disparaged ‘right-minded academic’ where in his April 16, 2006 *Sunday Standard* article, he had argued that, “one has to have proven record of comprehending ideologically inspired discourses and abstractions to fit within this body of scholars” who like judges “give texts a fair hearing”. According to him, this all-powerful literary elite “assess texts from a theoretical position and state their strengths and weaknesses”. To him, anything short of this theoretical approach to literary criticism is ‘literary gangsterism’. When one is about to accuse Kabaji of literary conservatism and dictatorship, one is set aback by his position in the *Sunday Standard* of February 26, 2006 article where he advocates for a shift from traditional way of thinking about poetry for it is a “genre that is most inherent to the self”. In the article, he agrees that in poetry there is a margin of mystery that denies complete analysis. Later, in the *Sunday Standard* of April 16, 2006 article cited above, he says “Caroline Nderitu’s poetry may never be so artistically endowed as Jared Angira’s, Professor Arthur Luvai’s, Stephen Partington’s or Kwamchetsi Makokha’s but it has its audience in the diversity of our national tastes.” In the article, he terms Caroline Nderitu as “the queen of a certain type of poetry that appeals to a section of our population”. Since Mochama’s poetry has its audience too and it obviously appeals to a section of the population, one wonders why he is a ‘literary gangster’ and not a ‘king’ of a certain type of poetry as far as Kabaji is concerned. In his blanket condemnation of ‘spoken word’ poetry, Kabaji seemed not to
realize that Stephen Partington that he now acknowledges in this article, just like Mochama, is a renowned figure in the world of ‘spoken word’ poetry in Kenya.

The casualness with which Kabaji approaches Mochama’s poetry and the strong subjectivity that underlies most of its critics’ lopsided criticism is betrayed by their wrong assumption that ‘spoken word’ poetry that Mochama writes should conform to the traditional poetry convections. They fail to realize or acknowledge that the proponents of this form of poetry were looking for something fresher, newer, hippier and more in touch with the times in which they were living. Their establishment of unconventional venues like cafes, bars and social media as avenues for staging this emerging poetry is a clear pointer to their unconventional thinking. It is actually a literary fact that a good writer is the one that travels past the conventional forms of thought instead of retreating to the way things have always been done. Mochama and other ‘spoken word’ poets bring freshness and creativity in their works.

1.10 Research Methodology

Tony Mochama has written a lot of poems both published and unpublished and therefore to allow an in-depth investigation of his form of poetry, a case study research design was preferred where his published anthology of eighty poems was used as the source of the study’s primary data. Since the purpose of the research was to draw a conclusion on his poetry in general, a highly representative sample was required and so a systematic random sampling design where the researcher picked each poem in the anthology after skipping the preceding one was applied. Through this, forty poems were selected and
then grouped in terms of their dominant style and thematic concerns. After this, eighteen of them were dropped from the sample mainly because they fell in groups that were over represented. To replace them and to increase the sample size, further twenty-one poems were selected through an extreme case of purposive sampling. This latter sampling technique focused on poems that seemed unusual and therefore rich in the desired information. The two sampling procedures helped in eliminating bias while giving a sample that was both sizeable and sufficiently representative. The forty-two sampled poems were then textually analyzed to reveal not only their stylistic character but also the inherent thematic concerns. This is what eventually informed their and the generalized appraisal of the anthology.

Apart from the textual analysis of the primary data, secondary data obtained through library research where relevant materials and books were consulted greatly informed the study. Relevant newspaper articles, online journals, blogs, Facebook and Twitter updates from poets and their fans were also followed. All these culminated in the findings found in the following chapter.
CHAPTER TWO
THE STYLISTIC CONFORMITY AND DIGRESSION OF MOCHAMA’S
POETRY

2.1 Introduction

According to Mugubi (2005) the poetics or the literariness of a text is derived from the creative linguistic and paralinguistic manipulations inherent in the text in question. The how and to what extent a writer endeavours to produce new, exciting and stimulating ideas, through a personal and imaginative fashioning of language and other resources at his or her disposal, culminates in the overall definition of that work’s stylistic character. Therefore in creative compositions, a writer may, within the generic bounds, use the established possibilities of the chosen language and other extra-lingua aspects or transcend these boundaries hence unraveling new, enlivening and gratifying communicative possibilities. This means, a literary writer has freedom to circumvent or ignore the generic and language conventions as long as such transgression is purposeful and worthy in terms of aesthetics and communication.

Although the above argument seems to advocate for innovation, experimentation and non-obfuscation in creative works, care must be taken not to push this concept of innovation and experimentation so far that the work in question becomes completely isolated from its generic traditions. This is because one cannot comprehend, analyze and evaluate any work of art without reference to its conventions. The very fact that one recognizes a certain structure as a work of art implies its conformity to some universally acknowledged elements. This therefore means that the celebration of a work’s uniqueness
and individuality should be anchored on its adherence to the dictates of the prevailing period, genre, purpose and the chosen language. It is this culmination of conventional norms whose presence, absence and effectiveness are considered in analysis and evaluation of a text. Therefore this chapter looks at the extent to which Mochama conforms to and digresses from the established poetic elements for effective and functional transference of his envisioned meaning. It is only after this scholarly examination of his poetry’s techniques, structure and presentation that one can make an objective appraisal of it.

2.2 Mochama’s Stylistic Conformity

Although Mochama’s poetry, just like much of the poetry published today, is written in open form, it has adhered to most of the dictates of the fixed forms of poetry. The work is structured and presented in such a way that it is as demanding, interesting, intellectually stimulating and satisfying as the fixed forms. While retaining other poetic features, it also compensates for its lack of metre by deriving its rhythmic quality from other phonological aspects. Below are some of the universally acknowledged elements of poetry that Mochama has employed in his published poems:

2.2.1 Repetition

Repetition is almost synonymous with poetry. All its forms, whether oral, fixed or open, have exploited this stylistic device since their inception and therefore Mochama, like any other poet, has extensively used this feature in almost all his poems in the anthology. Since it is the regular recurrence of an idea, sound, word, phrase, line or even a whole stanza for emphasis, rhythm and at times creation of suspense, there are many instances
of repetition throughout Mochama’s anthology that can be classified into various categories namely:

**The General Repetition of Words and Phrases**

The word ‘freedom’, in the poem rightly titled ‘*Freedom*’ on page 13 of the anthology has been repeated very many times.

- Freedom is my kingdom
- To keep
- Freedom don’t come cheap
- Freedom isn’t just servicing lip

In this poem of five stanzas of four lines each, the term ‘freedom’ has been repeated ten times. Apart from its rhythmic value, this repetition also emphasizes hence revealing the subject matter of the poem.

The poem ‘*Black Mischief*’ also exploits repetition for rhythm and emphasis. Consider this:

- So he crossed the invisible line
- Between here and there…………
- Between Monarchy and Kenya
- Between peasantry and pleasantry
- Between being heir to colonial history

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Apart from achieving the above stated two purposes, the repetition of this phrase can also serve in audience’s involvement where the listening audience can predict and participate in its rendition.

In the poem ‘Kiedis’, the phrase ‘drip-drip-dripping’ is repeated three times to visualize the flow of the content of the drip. This repetition has also an onomatopoeic effect where the sounds of the words imitate the sound of the action.

I’ll be in hospital with a plastic drip

Drip-drip-dripping ‘life’ into my sunken skin

I will, slow-ly, fade out of view

Drip-drip-dripping, a sinking ship

Other examples of poems with repetition of words and phrases are ‘Hippo Poetry’ where the word ‘hippo’ is repeated seven times, ‘Formulating Metaphors’ where the term ‘metaphors’ is repeated three times, ‘The Dream of Devil Vera’ where the phrase ‘Devil Vera’ is repeated five times among many other poems.

Refrain

This is the repetition of a word, phrase, a line or a series of lines at the same point in each stanza throughout the poem.

Apart from its repetition in the stanzas, the word ‘freedom’ in the poem ‘Freedom’ can also be a refrain because it is the first word in the first lines of all the poem’s five stanzas.
In the poem 'Whack (Kuala Lumpur)' that appears great in sound but lacking in content, the term ‘whack’ is repeated at the beginning of each of the first lines of the six stanzas. Also the phrase ‘for a long time, you’ve…’ is refrained in the first three stanzas of the poem, ‘Last Poem’ while in the longest poem in the anthology, ‘(the sixty sixth poem) by Ben Heaven’, the line ‘this is my darkest hour’ is repeated at the beginning of all the stanzas except in stanza one.

Alliteration and Assonance

Alliteration is the repetition of the initial consonant sounds of words within a line or lines of a poem while assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in a line or succeeding lines of a poem. These two were handled together as they tend to mostly appear at the same position of the poem with assonance usually following alliteration.

Apart from emphasizing meaning, alliteration and assonance are sound patterns that contribute a lot in the achievement of musicality in a poem. In ‘spoken word’ poetry especially, alliteration and assonance come out clearly due to the distinctiveness and clarity with which the performer says the syllables. Instead of the normal syllabic stress, he or she over-stresses where there is such a repetition of sounds.

The title “Dead Dreams of Dedan Kimathi” on page 11 of the anthology has both alliteration and assonance. This is also the case in the first line of the poem, ‘Blackmischief’ as shown below:

Sisina’s sin it seems
Other instances of alliteration and assonance can be found in these two lines of the poem, ‘Rock of Rages’.

I thought of how we, the other we, used to rock back and forth.

Foam and froth back and forth till dawn came up across the horizon.

Last night Devil Vera dreamt the dark dream again.

The underlined sounds in the above first line of the poem, ‘The Dream of Devil Vera’ alliterates while the succeeding underlined vowel sounds are instances of assonance.

**Consonance**

This is related to the two features discussed above only that it is the use of similar consonant sounds in different positions of the word(s) in a line(s) of a poem. There are more instances of consonance than alliteration in Mochama’s poetry.

Long lost in this hallowed walls

Where halls lie polished unalloyed

The underlined sounds above are examples of consonance in the first two lines of the poem, ‘Colonial Ghosts...’.

The last stanza of the poem, ‘Whack (Kuala Lumpur)’ appearing on page 29 of the anthology is full of consonance. The underlined sounds below will suffice:

Whack was what whack is and had always been.
back in the dark fuck huck and a man called jack

having run out of luck stuck in the muck with a nag
called mag who you wish she had a hockey puck in her mug.

Each of the above indicated pair of consonance is preceded by an assonance.

Rhyme

This is the repetition of similar sounds at the end of different words in a poem. These words can be at the end of each line, some lines or alternating lines. Rhyme can also appear internally though this is rare in poetry in English.

The distance between the rhyming sounds determines the rhythm of the poem. Rhyme also determines the tone and brings unity in a poem where there is a sense of resonance that comes when a word echoes the sound of another. Apart from determining tone, this matching of the final sounds also creates mood hence intensifying the poem's meaning.

Some modern poets avoid rhyme citing its mechanical and meaningless application that leads to dullness and predictability of a poem. Other poets tend to over-use rhyme hence making it a distracting ornament.

Although Mochama has his fair share of what appears to be a forced rhyme in some of his poems, he has sparingly used it to enhance the musicality of his poetry.

The poem 'Freedom' has rhyme in its first and last stanzas.

Freedom is my kingdom
To keep 2

Freedom don’t come cheap 3

Freedom isn’t just servicing lip 4

Or something shot from the cowboy’s hip 5

Freedom is the smile pointed on a clown 18

The pen guided by a poet’s intuition 19

Freedom is my kingdom to keep 20

And it don’t come Shanghai cheap 21

Line 5 of this poem appears misplaced in terms of its meaning. Perhaps, it is there just to achieve rhyme. The same can be seen in stanza three of the poem ‘Mosquito -51’:

You seldom get mile-age from being a poetic sage 9

Not in this age when hip-hop is all the rage 10

‘Antique’- this is how they describe the literary cage 11

That they keep us locked up in (savage) 12

The word in brackets seems to have been pasted there for the sole purpose of rhyme. Otherwise it ought to be ‘savagery’ if it has to serve any purpose in the meaning of the poem.
The last stanza of the poem ‘The Stories Addict’ also has rhyme.

Some nights-when disease eats too deep 14

I begin to think of Nero, as a hero, 15

And I cannot sleep. 16

So I resort to heroine 17

Thinking it morphine 18

Then, smelling alpine, the stories surging thru pine 19

The poem ‘The Rest of Our Lives’ has several instances of rhyme that also seem to be forced. Below is the illustration:

**The Rest of Our Lives**

Will be spent living on the edge of knives 1

Drugs as-Damocles’ swords 2

Only it will be our T-cells strang up 3

like hope on gallows 4

Or gloomy galleries 5

with all our memories 6
sliding down, into valleys, not of our making / our own, remorse

Of when our skin was brown (The rest of our lives, will not be our own).

Our life is a town

built into a sanken foundation

something slightly Egyptologic

crawling beneath the arm-hair down, no logic.

Something cryptic,

the anti-thesis, to genetic-

Gothic, mystic- the cemetry's kiss

Something that erased

futur-istic bliss

I re-call the time at the Muheti Crescent Park

when we lay back

And listened to Linkin park

The place where dew

Caressed me and you
2.2.2 Imagery

This is the backbone of poetry. It is the heart and soul of poems. This is because it mainly appeals to the sense of sight which underlines all other senses. Imagery involves the use of language in a different way that produces pictures or images in the minds of the audience. This is why aspects of imagery are also called figures of speech. Mochama's poetry is strong on imagery. He has mainly utilized the following figures of speech:

Similes

This term is derived from the Latin word 'similis' which means 'like'. Using 'like' and 'as' similes compare unlike things to transfer the qualities of feelings from one to the other whose result is a pleasure that comes with the sudden recognition of likeness. The underlined lines below are examples of similes in Mochama's poetry and the poems they are found in:

You clench your buttocks

And if it escapes, any-way,

You crush it like the Hungarian revolution

(of '56)

‘To Kill a Mocking Fart...’.

From a dark waitress so thin

She could be a tooth-pick

‘Night Runner-Dec Simmers
In the pantheon of pathos’.
Wreaths, really, grow

And like proud cloaks are draped on

Old soldiers' graves

She's mascara

Spread out like the booty

Of a pitched battle, never fought

A detergent Ad

Whose message did not get across

Her nipples, I think, look like hard little koala nuts

But the desire is different, resigned almost

Like a photograph from that beautiful holiday

The above two examples are from the poem, 'Sijui Niseme...'.

Like a rose

With missing petals

But, boy, they hurt as hard

As being struck on the head

'Trans-porting'.

'Bad Morning Lady'.

'Feather-lite'.
Metaphors

Just like similes, metaphors compare something unusual with something familiar but directly. Since they use terms in transferred or connotative sense, metaphors are more preferred than similes for they vastly extend the language at a poet’s disposal. Metaphors broaden senses and meanings despite poetry’s economy of words. By so doing, they enable a poem carry the intensity of purpose and meaning.

Mochama has used quite a number of metaphors in his poems. The following underlined examples will suffice:

Freedom is a girl after the school-bell has rang
Running on exported air.
Freedom is the beer a free man drinks
Freedom is the smile painted on a clown
The pen guided by a poet’s intuition
Freedom is my kingdom to keep
but, maybe she’s just the lean meat
eaten at the once opulent Six Eighty Hotel
opposite
eaten, make no bones about it, raw
a marabou stork now serving guinesses stout

9-‘Night runner-Dec
Simmers
In the pantheon of patho...’.
Miss atlas,

A regular Vasco da Gama

Of the night

She pretends to be asleep

But her eyes are lips, asking

Her rose petals explored

By another beast!

Our life is a town

Built into a sanken foundation

I will, slowly, fade out of view

Drip-drip dripping, a sinking ship

Trying to communicate to stars

Which are the frozen cadavers of gods gone cold

Life is roses, and cacti,
Personification

Also called pathetic fallacy, personification involves giving human qualities or behaviour to animals and objects. For example, "Time / Steals everything" in the poem 'To the Man I Never Met' on page 68 of the anthology, is a pathetic fallacy because 'stealing' which is a human quality has been bestowed on an inanimate thing, 'time'. Other examples of personification in Mochama's poetry are:

And her smile n eyes still slay me

Mingling with the cry of the wind

Flow in a river that whispers her name

Also the whole poem entitled 'Wildlife Song' is a personified conversation between various wild animals and the persona though there are interludes of descriptions by the persona.

2.2.3 Satire

This is the use of humour, irony, hyperbole, caricature, apostrophe, allegory and mockery to ridicule, or expose or criticize vices in the society. Though any of these can stand on its own as a stylistic device, it is their combination and intended purpose that will make them qualify as satire. Mochama combines a number of them to satirize follies in his society and therefore quite a big number of his poems in the anthology are satirical in nature. In the poem, 'Trading Places' he uses humour, irony, hyperbole and caricature to
expose and criticize the trade imbalances between Africa and Europe. It is pure exaggeration to imagine Africa becoming a super-power and Western countries’ presidents paying homage to African heads of state. This is also ironical considering the poverty levels in Africa and the sycophancy of some of these African heads of states. The poem becomes humourous where he caricatures the Kenya’s former president. The imagination of Kibaki calling Chirac ‘kumbafu’ will definitely provoke laughter.

Satire’s aim of telling the bitter truth laughingly is achieved in the poem, ‘Saluting Boots, Guns and Helmets’ where the irony of soldiers saluting the boots, guns and helmets of their two thousand dead colleagues lightens this otherwise sombre moment. Mochama ridicules the military’s top brass poor attitude towards their juniors. To them, saluting the dead soldiers is an honour enough and will, in addition, harden the resolve of the remaining “to simply go on” with war. The poem satirizes America’s war against terror in far away countries.

Mochama also uses apostrophe in the poem, ‘Dead Dreams of Dedan Kimathi’ where the persona addresses a dead or rather absent Dedan Kimathi yet he cannot respond. He couples this with such sardonic questions as, “What you fought for, / Field Marshal? / So that we shall / Be free—or for a Kimathi Street / statue?” to ridicule the Kenyan leaders’ handling of the freedom heroes. The irony that Kimathi died while fighting for the freedom we enjoy today yet his body is still imprisoned in Kamiti prison makes the whole idea of honouring him with a statue laughable.
In the poem, ‘*Blackmischief,*’ Mochama again employs irony from the title to the reference of what Sisina did as a ‘sin’ to satirize the relationship between the natives and the white settlers in an independent Kenya. The ironical description of Sisina’s sin and the reference of whites as gods almost caricatures and understates a very bitter murder of an innocent on very flimsy grounds.

Other instances of satire can be found in the poems ‘*Recording Statements*, ‘*Wallime’s Post Humous Job*, ‘*The Poetry Police*, ‘*To Kill A Mocking Fart...*’ and the two allegorical poems titled, ‘*Hippo Poetry*’ and ‘*Wildlife Song*’.

2.2.4 Rhetorical Questions

These are questions that demand no answers and are therefore posed for emphasis or to make an audience ponder on an issue. The questions also heighten the poem’s musicality as well as reveal the persona’s frame of mind. Their rising intonation affects the tone hence the mood of the poem. There are several instances of rhetorical questions in Mochama’s poetry. Some poems in the anthology have one or more rhetorical questions.

The following will suffice as examples:

Every stanza of the poem ‘*Formulating Metaphors*’ ends with a rhetorical question. The questions make the audience ponder on the stifling conventions that ought to guide poetry’s composition. According to Mochama, creation of a poem ought to be spontaneous and not guided by rules and formulations.
Did he buy her – Smirnoff Ice, then, look into her eyes?

(only twice)??

These three lines of the poem, ‘Feather-lite’ are rhetorical questions revealing the mental anguish of a man embittered by his wife’s/girl-friend’s infidelity evidenced by the two used condoms. The cuckold, in disbelief, wonders what may have pushed her into the act. The possibility that she may have been attracted with a beer shows the levels to which morality has sank.

There are many more aspects of style in Mochama’s poetry. However, in analysis of style, it is the frequency of occurrence of an aspect that should be considered before its highlighting as an aspect of the writer’s style. It was with this in mind that the study settled on the above as Mochama’s main common stylistic devices.

2.3. Mochama’s Stylistic Digression

Mochama’s work falls under ‘spoken word’ poetry, an emerging form of poetry that has unique stylistic characteristics. Due to its intended oral transmission nature, this form of poetry is bound to cater for the interest of its audience especially considering the fact that they may be hearing it for the first time. Unlike in reading where one can always flip pages back and forth, when listening to a recitation, one has to get everything while it is in progression. Aware of this, ‘spoken word’ poets are forced to be a bit prosaic in their poems so that their listening audience can get the flow hence the message. It is this ‘prosaicness’ that critics like Wa Mumbi cite when he argues that clipping the lines of
short story does not render it a poem. Though he is right, a poet can still use enjambment, a stylistic technique that allows one to carry the sense over to another line beyond the metrical unit. This is to allow the flow of sense from one line to another or even from one stanza to the other. Though this tends to make a poem prosaic, it may be necessary for the poem's intelligibility which supersedes Wa Mumbi's argument.

To achieve this all important intelligibility in his poetry, Mochama has too not avoided 'prosaicness'. Most of his poems in the anthology would read like a story if the lines were to be joined. Sample the following extracts from two poems as examples of 'prosaicness' in Mochama's poetry:

Trading Places (for the Hong Kong WTO 'Talks')

The day Africa became the solitary super-power
In the world
There was panic in the stock markets of the earth
Nairobi sneezed, and New York caught pneumonia
The Gold Standard in Zurich was replaced by blood and Milk
From pure-bred Maasai Zebu Cows
Chirac came, via Iraq, to beg aid from the government of Kenya. But Kibaki called him 'kumbafu,' gave him stringent conditions he had to meet first including reducing the number of French immigrants, trying to sneak across the Sahara into Kenya and doing the breaststroke across Mediterranean to get into Morocco [sic].

The day Africa became the solitary super-power in the world there was panic in the stock markets of the earth. Nairobi sneezed, and New York caught pneumonia the Gold Standard in Zurich was replaced by blood and milk from pure-bred Maasai Zebu cows.

Chirac came, via Iraq, to beg aid from the government of Kenya but Kibaki called him 'kum bafu,' gave him stringent conditions he had to meet first including reducing the number of French immigrants, trying to sneak across the Sahara into Kenya and doing the breaststroke across Mediterranean to get into Morocco.

The above are just three stanzas of a nine stanza poem.
Blackmischief

Sisina’s sin, it seems
Is that he had no idea
Where Naivasha ends,
And England begins.

So he crossed the invisible line
Between here and there........
Between monarchy and Kenya,
Between peasantry and pleasantry
Between being the heir to colonial history
And being the heir to colonial history
And being a black with the traditional zero

sum legacy
(we Africans can trace our ancestry right
back to our parents).
Sisina crossed the line
That divides the territory
Between being bound by the law
And being a grazing god to whom
The law is neither here nor there
And penal codes are but hot air
(as viewed from Derwent-ic attics, or balloon sundowners) just bally-hoo.

In the lands of white gods
Those who cross the line
Are apes, robbers or goats
To be summarily shot.

(They who cross the line’, says the invisible sign, ‘walk into the line of white fire-and become black ghosts’)

Sisina’s sin, it seems / is that he had no idea / where Naivasha ends, / and England begins
So he crossed the invisible line. / Between here and there… / Between peasantry and pleasantry. / Between being the heir to colonial history / and being a black with the traditional zero / sum legacy / (we Africans can trace our ancestry right / back to our parents). / Sisina crossed the line / that divides the territory / between being bound by the law / and being a grazing god to whom / the law is neither here nor there / and penal codes are but hot air / (as viewed from Derwent-ic attics, or balloon sundowners) just bally-hoo.

In the lands of white gods / those who cross the line / are apes, robbers or goats / to be summarily shot. / (They who cross the line, / says the invisible sign, / ‘walk into the line of white fire / and become black ghosts’).
The above are also the first three stanzas of the poem found on page 17 of the anthology. Whereas the visual impressions of sentences broken up into lines seem to affect the reader's eyes in mysterious ways, a continuous reading of the joined sample would appear like a narration hence prose in the name of poetry. For his recitations not to be narrations considering this prosaic nature of 'spoken word' poetry, Mochama's sound patterns are superb. His utilization of repetition, alliteration, assonance and consonance in the above 2\textsuperscript{nd} example not only heightens the musical quality of the poem but also aids the memorization and recall during recitations.

Another unique characteristic of 'spoken word' poetry that Mochama exploits in his anthology is the diction. Since 'spoken word' poetry is generally meant to reach its audience as sounds in air, it tends to be written in simple enough language to enhance audience's understanding on first hearing. Throughout his anthology, Mochama has used words that are simple and in common usage. Although this use of common language and clichés in 'spoken word' poetry has been accused of unaesthetizing the readers and listeners, Mochama, like any other 'spoken word' poet, has been forced to use them. Also, in a Brechtian style of writing in your target audience's idiom, Mochama has used language that would appeal to the young generation that he targets. Since he picks his language of writing from his audience's mouths, he has used slang, sheng, colloquialism, short-hand writing among other linguistic deviations common with his targeted audience. The underlined words and phrases in the poem below serve as an example of Mochama's linguistic deviations:

\[ \text{(poem text)} \]
Booze has this beautiful way
of making life seem footloose
The day, outside, is charcoal gray
inside ‘Wankers’ bar-all is right as stars.

The winking neon lady in purple mascara
tells me she used to be a stripper
in Asmara.

“Aswa,” says my friend, whose Swahili is all skewered
“mama, didn’t I screw you, in Addis Ababa?”

If you cross the line, you just cross the line,
if you cross the border, then you become ah ‘hore
unless you are a ‘broda’, then you’re just a drug peddler.

The girls in Winkers bar should be arrested
for being big-breast carriers
and for packing ass, like guns
it’s not just illegal
it’s dangerous

The poem ends: “there’s a girl
selling coke/on dis-count”.

... a gal, coke, A Miss A Mama
Meanings of the Above Underlined Words

Booze – beer/alcohol

Wankers – masturbators.

Aswa-Swahili for ‘definitely’

Mama – woman

Screw – have sexual intercourse


broda – a term coined to refer to a Nigerian man

gal - sheng for ‘girl’.

Apart from the above, the underlined words and phrases in the following extracts from different poems further illustrate Mochama’s unique choice of words:

What we don’t see are the chokoras 5

who line off litter, and the parking meters 6

counting the ‘Hamzas’ the way we once counted stars 7 – ‘Nairobi West’.

I am the unsung poet 6

Because the musicians sing about hip-hop and Kapuka 7

Na bado sija-vuka sakafu 8

Lakini wapi? 17 – ‘Immortal’
With a green simu ya jamii, manned by a jinii/ whose name was simply, mammie!/

The jinii would be jimmy-jammed, and he’d call Jamii for free — ‘The Dream of Devil Vera’.

We used to walk home coz mom 3— ‘Trans-porting’.

The above underlined words can loosely be translated as below;

Chokoras - Street urchins
Hamzas - Money
Kapuka - A form of rap music
Na bado sija-vuka sakafu - A sheng for ‘Not yet joined the other side’
Lakini wapi - Swahili for ‘but where’
Simu ya jamii - A public telephone booth
Mammie - Sheng for ‘mother’ or ‘lady’
Jimmy- jammed- Mochama’s coinage for ‘confused’
Jamii - Swahili for ‘family’
Coz – short-form of ‘because’

Other short-forms found in Mochama’s poetry are;
Lite - light
Nite – night
‘em - them
Although this use of simple and colloquial language helps in the easier and faster understanding of Mochama’s poetry and actually brings his poetry down to the level that it can be enjoyed by every literate person hence eroding the fast encroaching enigmatization of poetry, it has its negativity too. Words and phrases that can be understood by only a small section of the society obscure his poetry to the majority. For example:

**Found in Uncle Moody institution**

17

And it don’t come **Changhai cheap**

21

These two lines are found in the poem ‘**Freedom**’. In the first line, the underlined phrase was the then’s colloquial for ‘prison’ while in the second line the underlined is an allusion to the Kenyans’ belief that Chinese (Changhai) things are cheap. The two will prove difficult to understand by future generations and non-Kenyans. Also, in the poem, ‘**Building Houses**’ the poet uses words and phrases that can only be understood by a certain age group. The statement ‘chill at your digs’ in line 10 is slang for ‘relax at your house’ while ‘Thirte-fae’ in line 21 is a corruption of ‘thirty five’. The poem has other examples of such words like, ‘boondocks’ and ‘dacha’ which appear quite elusive
meaning-wise. Such words and phrases may at times obscure a poem to the majority of the future audience.

Unlike the mainstream poetry, Mochama’s work also extensively utilizes allusion as a stylistic device. These many instances of allusion were meant to carry his listening audience with him since they are based on the current affairs of the time. Allusion is indeed a key characteristic of ‘spoken word’ poetry which is generally meant for a specific audience at the time of its composition and performance. This means its predominant use by Mochama, though enhancing the topicality and immediacy of his poetry’s subject matter in its mentioning of the issues, occurrences and personalities of the day, may hinder communication to the less-informed members of his targeted audience or the future consumers of his poetry. This makes some Mochama’s poems time and audience specific which is a negation of the universality of literature.

The beauty and the significance of the poem ‘Blackmischief’ for instance lies on the realization that the poem was composed and performed when the issue of Ole Sisina was hot and in the people’s mouths. Most of the members of the audience were able to understand and follow this poem because they were privy to the occurrence alluded to which may not be the case with today’s readers of the poem. In fact, a performance of this poem today will not arouse the emotions it aroused then. It would also be hard to enjoy the poem ‘Hummer’ if one does not have a prior knowledge of the controversy that surrounded this make of a vehicle in Kenya in the year 2006. The poet juggles the words ‘Hummer’, ‘Hammar’ and ‘Humour’ to simply satirize that time’s much ado about nothing.
The poem 'Equity; a commercial poem' will be totally obscure to listeners or readers who are not aware of this bank and its friendly policies. One also ought to know the history of Kenya or have background knowledge of Dedan Kimathi's legend to fully decipher the poem 'Dead Dreams of Dedan Kimathi'.

There are two types of allusions in Mochama's poetry. The one cited above where the whole poem alludes to a factual issue or a happening and the other where there is a single or few instances in the poem that may not hinder its communication. The former makes the entire poem allegorical while the latter only adds beauty to the poem without much effect on its communication. The poem 'Whispers' that eulogizes the late Wahome Mutahi, for example, has an allusion to the Citrus Club where Mutahi used to stage his vernacular plays. This allusion, though enhancing the poem's effectiveness, does not affect much the overall communication of the poem to those who may not unravel the allusion. All in all, Mochama's use of allusion in his poetry exposes an all-round poet who is quite knowledgeable on current affairs and historical facts. His mention of not so well known but important literary personalities like Ndambuzo Marechera in the poem 'Sad Dodo' shows that he has read extensively.

Another unique characteristic of Mochama's poetry is that unlike other poetry anthologies, his has a poetic prologue. It is in this prologue that he reveals his association with Russia that he much alludes to in a good number of his poems. In this prologue, he quotes a line from an American rapper's music that he refers to as a doggerel verse. He goes ahead to accuse "the mainstream world" of regarding such doggerels as "black
poetry”. This accusation pre-empts the misconceptions about his poetry that was a concern of this study. The prologue betrays Mochama’s love for gangster rhymes and what he calls ‘rap-oetry’. This foreshadows the observations that were made in his poetry. This prologue also contains what one would call glaring mistakes, typing errors and inconsistencies. The anthology’s title on its cover changes here to read, “So What If I Am a Literary Gangsta?” Also the literary discourse section has never been in the East African Standard newspaper as Mochama indicates here but in the Sunday Standard newspaper and later Saturday Nation of Nation Media Group. There are also several typing errors where for example the word ‘like’ is typed as ‘lines’ and ‘Egara Kabaji’ as ‘Egaji Kabira’. In poetry though, one cannot conclusively refer to these and many others found in his poetry as typing errors since one cannot know the exact intentions of the poet who has a poetic licence to play around with words, their spellings and meanings. He or she is also allowed to create his own words.

Although this study, being textual in nature, only focused on sound features that are realizable in the segments presented in a text, the fact that Mochama has used unique graphological marks and symbols that have phonic potential was also noticeable. Apart from ‘measuring’ lines of his poems to handle human breath patterns where short lines mean high pitch, tempo, pace and vice-versa, Mochama has also used the graphological features like brackets, question marks, hyphens and dashes to change the sound hence tone of the poem in question. In the poem ‘Litter-ati’ for example, the hyphen separating this word not only changes its sound but meaning too. Without it, the word would sound
like 'literati' but its insertion there brings the 'litter' sense that the poet intended. This makes the word a pun.

Further in the poem, the poet uses brackets that the listening audience realizes through the reciter’s or performer’s change of voice. For example, in this stanza;

- Paris, the paparazzi
- Tells me-
- is the city of love
- (and he’s glitterati),

the last line that is in brackets will have to be separated from the rest through the performer’s lowering of the pitch.

- While Spain
- is a Big Bucket of Champagne
- ( in Spain-
- they do not do
- Beckett)
- Maybe Beckham
- I lived in a sub-city
- where sub-urbia
- does not exist
- for utopia
- there’s Ethiopia
a dead camera-man's
vision-of famine
(our souls-bellowed Bellow
and our bellies/so hollow they were!
not the mamas
of Addis, Ababa
nor Aden's Eden, or Eden's Aden
but Bin Laden's men! The ardent men of Bin Laden

In the city of litter
nothing glitters-
not even the glitter
on the women's collective face!

In the place
where I come from
everything is strewn
and 'life is strong'
like sugarless strungi
(that's "strong tea" but
the luhyas miss-ed out on
the English accent)
Although some of the punctuation marks in the stanzas above cannot be verbally manifested in a performance, others like exclamation marks change the pitch and the pace of the poem’s performance. Apart from their effect on the sound of the poem, they also help in giving some extra information. For example, the allusion to that photographer who immortalized the famine in Ethiopia via a photo of a dying child he captured, is further elaborated for those who may not get it fast. The information in brackets on the hollowness of the bellies is added so that that child’s emaciated body can come back in the minds of those familiar with the photo.

Also, the last three lines of the poem appear to be added to just create humour but not to necessarily add anything to the poem’s meaning. This is perhaps why they are in brackets.

Since ‘spoken word’ poetry is originally created for a live and active audience, it is usually not fixed at the onset. What the poet writes down before the performance is just a skeleton to guide his/her rendition. During this eventual rendition, the audience’s reactions can force a pause, a repeat, a re-emphasis, additions or even a total diversion from the original script. It is this flexibility in rendition of ‘spoken word’ poetry that brings problems when it comes to a later transcription and publication of the poem since the poet may have several versions of that poem. If the poet decides to include the additions in the published version, for example, the added parts hang out hence interfering with the flow of the poem. The above example and many others like in the poem ‘The Rest of Our Lives’ where for instance, the poet further explains the oxymoron describing life as living death by indicating in brackets that it is indecipherable, give
further evidence that Mochama had first performed his poems before re-transcribing them later into their current forms in the anthology.

The last unique feature of Mochama’s poetry is the use of a poem’s title as its first line and its repetition at the end of the poem. When reciting or even reading the poem, ‘To Kill a Mocking Fart...’ one has to begin with the title to get the flow of the poem. This is also found in the poem, ‘The Rest of Our Lives’. On the other hand, the repetition of the title at the end of the poem as seen in the poem ‘St. Petersburg’ is meant to remind the members of the listening audience, who may have been lost during the recitation, what they have been listening to.

Though the culmination of the above Mochama’s poetic style is an aesthetic experience that is both unique and powerful, the significance of the communicative function of his poetry cannot be underestimated in its overall evaluation. The following chapter therefore explores thematic values of his poetry to its target audience.
CHAPTER THREE
THEMATIC CONCERNS IN TONY MOCHAMA’S POETRY

Mochama’s poetry is also unique in its handling of its audience’s immediate concerns. In his concentration on the topical and immediate concerns of his audience, Mochama demonstrates the relationship between literature and social political reality where poets talk about what is in the people’s mouths. This is mostly evident in ‘spoken word’ poetry whose audience does not have the luxury of researching the background of the poem and therefore need a poem whose message is easy to decipher and enjoy. This liberation of the poetry from abstractions may have contributed a lot in its popularity. This is in consideration of the fact that a great deal of a poem’s effect on its listener or reader depends on its immediacy and relevance. Though the subject matter may be common, it is put across in such a way that it titillates the audience. Some of the topical issues at the time of Mochama’s composition and performance and as exhibited in his poetry are:

**Neo-colonialism**

This is the continued exploitation, oppression and suppression of Africans by their former foreign masters even long after their acquisition of independence. In the poem ‘*Trading Places*’ that is based on the Hong Kong World Trade Organization’s talks that were geared towards reducing the trade imbalances between the developed and developing countries, Mochama satirically reverses the roles of these two sides. In a highly romanticizing tone, he nostalgically puts Africa at the political and economic centre of the world where he says that the day Africa becomes the solitary super-power in the
world, the hitherto world super-powers like France, Germany, America and Britain will get a taste of their own medicine. The beauty of this poem is that these countries have not been mentioned directly but are represented by their then presidents who were known for their condescending attitude towards Africa. In this poem, Mochama continues to say that African leaders, represented in the poem by Kibaki whose demeanour the audience knows very well, will slap these countries with stringent economic and political conditions and sanctions. This reversal of roles by Mochama may appear as utopian thinking and ironical considering the prevailing reality but what he wanted to put across in a rather humorous way was the fact that Africa can and will reach that level if the world's economic field is leveled. In this poem, Mochama also portrays the Western countries' hypocrisy in dealing with Africa and the Middle East. This is realized when the poem is read alongside the poetic prologue of his anthology where Mochama describes Africa, in the European view, as eclipsed by rampant crime, political corruption, military dictatorship, diseases, poverty, savagery and inflation. He says that though these problems are daily exaggerated by the Western media like CNN, Sky and Fox news channels, these super-powers do little to alleviate the problems. He calls for liberalization of oil multi-nationals like Shell and BP and change of monetary policies by the Breton Woods institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for Africa to realize her potential. In the following poem titled 'Saluting Boots, Guns and Helmets', Mochama attacks America's invasion of Iraq. He shows the inhumanity and the heartlessness of American leaders in sending their soldiers to fight in unnecessary and avoidable wars. He goes on to pinpoint the hypocrisy of celebrating and honouring
these wars’ fallen heroes where fellow marines are lined up in front of statues of their
dead comrades to salute “the ‘remains’ of our former, fallen comrades”. The leaders,
oblivious of the risks that they are exposing these innocent soldiers to, assert that the
“best way to honour those boys is to simply go on!” dying as their colleagues have. By
this, Mochama is questioning the essence of exposing the citizens to death in a war that
does not concern them much. This terror is ironically committed in the name of fighting
terror and democratizing the world.

The poem ‘Blackmischief’ is based on the brutal killing of Samson Ole Sisina by Tom
Cholmondeley for inadvertently trespassing into his land. Ole Sisina, a game ranger with
the Kenya Wildlife Service, was allegedly shot dead by Cholmondeley on April 19, 2005
while conducting an undercover investigation into illegal bush-meat trade on the
Delamere’s 48,000 acre Soysambu ranch in Naivasha. He was subsequently charged with
murder and spent a month in custody before the then Attorney General Amos Wako
directed the then Director of Public Prosecutions Philip Murgor to terminate the case
citing lack of evidence to sustain the charges. Using this highly controversial case in
which this Lord Delamere’s grandson was released by the Attorney General’s invocation
of the infamous ‘nolle prosequi’ principle of law, Mochama graphically illustrates the
racist attitude of the former settlers towards Africans and the independent government’s
illegal protection of these white criminals in the name of safeguarding foreign
investments. According to this poem, the whites have not only continued occupying the
massive tracts of land they grabbed from Africans but also continued to perpetuate
impunity on their hosts. This neo-colonization of Africa is further alluded to in the poem 'Colonial Ghosts' where Mochama portrays the rail-way transport as a reminder of the colonization and oppression of Africans by whites.

Apart from neo-colonialism, these poems also allude to the historical injustices that began with colonization and have continued even after attainment of independence. The poem, 'Dead Dreams of Dedan Kimathi' takes this further where the poet laments the continued incarceration and imprisonment of this freedom hero’s body in an unmarked grave in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison despite his sacrifice for the freedom that we enjoy today. While his family languishes in poverty, the government has ironically dedicated a street in Nairobi City Centre and a millions-worth statue in his honour. This is also alluded to in the poem.

Defense of his Poetry

Mochama did not take criticism of his poetry kindly. The poems, 'Freedom', 'Hippo Poetry', 'The poetry Police', 'Formulating Metaphors', 'Mosquito-51' and 'Immortal' are all responses to his critics. The poem, 'Freedom' though generally talking about the persona’s resolve to defend his freedom, there is a use of a metaphor in the last stanza that goes, “freedom is / ... the pen guided by a poet’s intuition”. This metaphor means that poetry is the unhindered flow of a poet’s mind on a paper. According to Mochama, poets are free to share their feelings and thoughts within or outside the generic confines.
In his highly symbolic poem, ‘Hippo Poetry’, Mochama shows the divide between the older generation of poets and critics represented by “the hippie hippos / who wear their hair long / ..., they think it’s still 1966”, and “the hip-hop hippos / who’ve gotten above themselves”. This seemingly far-fetched interpretation is corroborated by the poem’s title. The poem depicts the antagonism that arose with the advent of ‘Kwani’?s new generation of writers and older critics like Egara Kabaji.

The poem that follows this in the anthology and appropriately titled, ‘The Poetry Police’ alludes to the debate that was raging then on the poetics of Mochama’s poetry. This is evidenced by the poet’s allusion to his friend and colleague in ‘spoken word’ poetry, Derwent Partington in the first two lines of the poem. The term ‘Deviant’ may also refer to their poetry’s deviation. In the last stanza of this poem, Mochama summarizes by saying “when I run out of poetic tricks / I shall commit syntax / ferry my body out in a verse / and bury me, in the symmetry”. This means he shall always exercise his freedom of creativity regardless of what ‘the poetry police’ accuse him of. Mochama also uses the poem ‘Formulating metaphors’ to castigate the stifling rules in poetry. Using rhetorical questions for emphasis, he wonders whether the composition of poetry is like working with a plaster...“that if you couldn’t sculpture/your feelings in perfectly crafted words / then the Emotion-would remain raw?”

In ‘Mosquito-51’, Mochama laments the lack of appreciation of poets especially by the youth who would rather listen to hip-hop music. He says, “You seldom get mile-age from
being a poetic sage / not in this age when hip-hop is all the rage / Antique'- this is how
they describe the literary cage / that they keep us locked up in (savage)”. The last two
lines describe the limiting norms in poetry composition. This is echoed in the poem,
‘Immortal’ where Mochama says:

I am the unsung poet. 6

Because the musician sing about hip-hop and kapuka 7

Na bado sija-vuka, sakafu! 8

I don’t write poetry about them either. 9

Personal Experiences, Love Life and Lamentations

Most of Mochama’s published poems are lyrical. A close look at these personal poems
reveals much about the poet’s life, beliefs and experiences. The poem ‘Eternities Apart’
is nostalgic memories of the persona’s past love life with a partner who has long left him.
In the poem ‘Sijui Niseme....’ that has instances of vulgarity, Mochama describes the
fading desire for sex in a failing relationship. Stanza six of the poem ‘Feather-lite’
metaphorically describes an adulterous sexual liaison between the persona’s partner and
‘another beast’. The persona conjures this up after seeing “the two missing condoms”
from the normal pack of three. This elicits a psychological conflict in the mind of the
persona where he wonders what made her accept that fast and twice.

Her breast had been cupped 21

Her rose petals explored 22
By another beast!
(at least twice) Did he buy her-
Smirnoff Ice..........?

To further highlight her torn moral fabric, when the persona questioned this immorality, she protested:

“Did you expect me to join a con-vent”

And “may-be it wasn’t the first time,
So stop acting like I lost my virginity” and “more on”

Poetry being the outpouring of powerful feelings and thoughts, the poem ‘Pampers and Paediatricians’ exposes much of Mochama’s personal philosophy on family and child bearing. He ends this poem with a line “... I’ll keep shooting blanks / from my tasty AK-47” which is a euphemistic statement referring to a lack of fertilization during sexual encounters.

The poem ‘Infinite Mystery’ is a description of Mochama’s falling in love with his current wife, Sharon. He alludes to her in line 7 because as a featured poet and a regular performer in open ‘mic’ sessions, he is always accompanied by his wife, Sharon, and therefore when he mentions her name he expects the audience to know who he is referring to. These and many other personal poems, that were perhaps meant for certain
individuals among the members of the audience during their first performance, range from partial to extreme obscurity.

The Country’s Bad Governance

Just like any other creative writer, Mochama uses his pen to chastise the evils in his community. The poem 'Wellime's Post Humous Job' satirizes former president Kibaki’s appointment of the late Wellime as the treasurer of Western University College of Science and Technology post-humously. Here, the poet was attacking the former president’s hands-off system of governance where he dished out offers of appointments without the requisite consultation. This appointment of an already dead person had actually happened and so Mochama was simply alluding to what may have been the talk of the town at the time of the poem’s presentation.

Mochama goes on to criticize our prison services in the poem 'Recording Statements'. Here, he vividly describes the poor conditions of our prisons and the illegal and unprocedural way of extracting information from the suspects by our police force. Through harassments and torture, the suspects are forced to record false and incriminating statements.

Mochama also alludes to political assassinations in the poem 'To Kill a Mocking Fart...' where he juxtaposes it with the killing of a disturbing person. The juxtaposition of the two shows the futility of terminating a person whose cause is genuine and popular.
Other thematic concerns in Mochama’s anthology are:

i. Prostitution that is illustrated by the poem, ‘Bad Morning Lady’ and ‘Perspectives’

ii. Eulogies and deaths of prominent personalities where the poem ‘Kiedis’ predicts the later death of the Rock star, Michael Jackson due to drug overdose while the poem ‘Whispers’ is a nostalgic memorial of Wahome Mutahi aka ‘Whispers’ who was a key figure in Kenyan theatre and creative writing.

iii. The process of the aging is also described by the poems, ‘The Rest of Our Lives’ and ‘The Physicks of Growing Up’

All the above show that Mochama’s poetry has social, political, historical, economical and cultural significance, a quality that is vital in the poetry’s evaluation found in the next chapter.
In as much as one ought to appreciate the divergent reactions that Mochama's poetry has elicited, for aesthetic responses are subjective, varied and difficult to describe, this study noted that most of these responses appear to be contradictory, erroneous and unsubstantiated in their assertions. Most of the critics who have questioned the validity of Mochama's work as poetry have cited its non-conformity to the established poetic standards as the main reason for their negativity towards it. This is despite the fact that none of these critics has defined these standards and critically assessed Mochama's poetry on their basis. This study was therefore geared towards doing that and therefore towards that end, the researcher conducted a scholarly examination of this poetry's techniques, presentation and communicative value against the backdrop of the established poetic norms. After doing so, there was a realization that although Mochama has variously transgressed some of the established poetic norms and standards, he has adhered to the most definitive ones. The above notwithstanding, one cannot disregard his work on the basis of transgression alone. From the very beginning, those critics who have solely used this transgression to argue that Mochama's writing is unconventional and therefore does not fit within the confines of poetry and literature in general have failed to realize that again and again great writers have shown that it is a supreme quality of genius and creativity to produce astonishingly uncharacteristic works of fiction. This therefore means that it is wrong to set up artificial standards for literary genres and proceed to use them as the singular regulative canons. This is the artistic anarchy and conservatism that
has constantly stifled creativity and innovation in literature. Divergent thinking ought to be encouraged as the characteristic identifier for creative writing.

While respecting the relativity of individual judgment of the work of art, the research findings in chapters two and three that reveal Mochama’s ability to integrate various stylistic features, whether they are standard or not, to articulate modern issues in the society should be the only considerations in the assessment of his works quality. This is because in a critical appraisal of a poem, one has to first and foremost consider how successfully it realizes its intended purpose. Although poetry has been celebrated for its aesthetics, its functional value should never be under-estimated too. The significance of a poem to its target audience should always guide its evaluation over and above its aesthetics and adherence to the established poetic norms.

The study’s findings in chapter three also show that despite the stated attempts to marginalize Mochama’s poetry and ‘spoken word’ poetry in general, its popularity and strength still lies in its ability to speak directly to issues that affect the society, what Wanjala (1980) describes as the burning issues of the day. Using simple and highly allusive language, Mochama’s thematic concerns capture the audience’s attention in a unique and indescribable way. However, although this assertion applies to most of the poems in the anthology, it is important to concede that there are some other poems in the same anthology that are just as a result of a plain word-juggling that is devoid of a concrete subject matter or a flow of communication. The poem on page 98 titled, ‘Teeth’ appears to have words that are just ‘cut and pasted’ to achieve some unity of sound at the
expense of meaning and communication. A look at its first few lines below illustrates this:

**TEETH**

I think of teeth 1
big giant teeth 2
like fleas 3
   -a dog barks 4
foam forms 5
   its language 6
from here henceforth 7
   will be clean 8
Omo, 9
   also occurs 10
a cow, 11
   among the Oromo 12
I am not cowed 13
   I roam 14
The vast savannah 15
   Of the Serengeti 16
and wait to encounter 17
   a yeti 18
Yet 19
In other poems like *The Hendrix Equation*, Mochama appears erratic in his communication hence jumbling up the poem’s message. The last two stanzas of the poem appear misplaced for there is no flow of meaning from the earlier stanzas.

Apart from the above two weaknesses, there are other poems in the anthology that appear completely obscure not because of the style applied but the privacy of their subject matters. They are either Mochama’s own reflections or may be meant for a specific audience. This notwithstanding, it should be generally understood that poems offer a vivid but subjective description and therefore one should approach them not expecting any definitive meaning since these meanings are usually elusive in poetry. A reader or even a listener should only aim to explore and not define a poem. He or she should pay attention to the text addressing it intelligently instead of skimming through it on a fault-finding mission. In most cases, when we bring our intellect to a poem, we discover meanings in it that were not apparent on the initial encounter. While and after making such interpretive discoveries, we may come to feel differently about a poem and derive considerable pleasure from it. This usually marks the beginning of our appreciation of the poem for we normally tend to find merit in poems whose meaning we understand and whose values are like our own.
That as it may be, when one is evaluating Mochama’s poetry, each poem ought to be considered on its own merit. The presence of perceived poor or bad or even low-standard poems in his anthology of eighty poems cannot and should not be used to wholly discredit him as a poet. Many celebrated poets, including the world-renowned Shakespeare, have such poems in their collections and therefore it would be unfair to consider Mochama’s anthology in totality in the evaluation of his poetry’s literary quality since each poem in the anthology constitutes an independent literary text. Mochama’s anthology, just like other poets’ anthologies, has masterpieces, literary gems, obscure, low-quality and even bad poems but this should not in any way reduce his worth as a poet.

Despite the negative criticism of his poetic style by even renowned literary critics, Mochama has remained consistent in his poetics. This consistency has led to his acceptance with time by some of the hitherto negative critics. In an article in Saturday Nation of June 1, 2013 titled, “Are These Kenya’s Finest Writers?” Julius Sigei celebrates the biggest names in Kenya’s literary scene as the country was celebrating 50 years of independence. In his list of forty most prominent writers, Sigei includes Mochama arguing that “he has earned his space on the literary high table for his consistent poetic styles”. Though he admits that his list is contentious, Sigei’s placing of Mochama alongside literary giants like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Francis Imbuga, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, Meja Mwangi, Micere Githae Mugo among others shows Mochama’s level of popularity and validity as a writer and poet. This study’s envisioned acceptance
of his anthology as poetry in the purest sense of the term would help in capitalizing on this fame to perhaps destroy the long-held negative perceptions about poetry especially by the youth.

Sigei’s celebration of Mochama was also echoed by Peter Oduor in *Saturday Nation* of June 15, 2013 article where he quips, “The 1990s belonged to Ngugi, the 70s to Imbuga and Meja Mwangi and 80s Whispers. Now it’s the reign of Mochama and Kahora to keep fans and critics talking”. Perhaps it is this consistent poetic style that has mellowed even Kabaji who is quoted in the same article saying that Mochama is “The 21st century Kenyan literary rebel”. According to the now mellowed Kabaji, Mochama is the most prolific young writer in Kenya today.

### 4.1 Recommendations

This being a case-study research, more research on other published ‘spoken word’ poetry is recommended. This is because not all ‘spoken word’ poets are like Mochama. There ought to be a further study of each individual artist before a conclusive commentary on the quality of ‘spoken word’ poetry can be made.

There are slight differences between Mochama’s published poems and their earlier version that used to appear at the poetry corner of *Sunday Standard* newspaper. The published versions appear like improvements of those earlier versions though the subject matter remains unchanged. Since poetry is like wine, the more refined, the more potent, this study recommends a study of this anthology’s sequels, *Literary Gangster II* and
Evanescence when they finally get published. There is a great possibility that these recommended studies will reveal a growth and refinement of Mochama the poet.

Since 'spoken word' poetry differs from the mainstream poetry in the sense that its phonetic aspects are foregrounded instead of the more conventional semantic and syntactic values and its beauty in performance is dependent on the vocal competence of its performer, there should be a study that compares the written script and its stage performance to observe the inter-textualities between the two.

One ought to also analyze Mochama's recorded performances of the published poems. This will clear the doubts that the popularity of his poetry may lie in his performances and not the quality of the written text.

There should also be a comparative study of the 'spoken word' and the written poetry forms to assess their similarities and differences. This should be followed by a further comparative study of the 'spoken word' poetry in Kenya and in the rest of the world to see whether Kenya is in tandem with the rest of the world in the advancement in this form of poetry.
APPENDIX: A LIST OF THE CITED POEMS

TRADING PLACES (For the Hong Kong WTO ‘talks’)

The day Africa became the
solitary super-power
In the world
There was panic in the stock
markets of the earth

Nairobi sneezed, and New
York caught pneumonia

The Gold Standard in Zurich
Was replaced by blood and
Milk
From pure-bred Maasai Zebu
Cows

Chirac came, via Iraq, to beg
aid from the Government of
Kenya
But Kibaki called him ‘Kumbafu,’ gave him stringent con-
ditions he had to meet first
including reducing the num-
ber of French immigrants,
trying to sneak across the
Sahara into Kenya
And doing the breaststroke
across Mediterranean to get
Into morocco

Chancellor Merkel was
ordered to bring back the
Deutsche Mark
And barter it for Merino goats
And Libya invaded America to
topple George Bush
"the tyrant," and "restore
democracy and freedom to
the long-suffering people of
the United States of America!"
the day Africa became the
Solitary super-power in the
world,
oil was liberalized, Shell,
Chevron, Exxon and BP
Nationalized,
And became parastatals
headed by the likes of Karin,
Mueni and odour ong’wen.
When? When
Africa became the solitary
super-power
On the day Oxfam replaced
The World Bank, And the IMF was placed
Under the strict supervision,
Of the Heinrich Boll Foundation
Bono was made Premier of
Great Britain,
And Geldoff was doffed to
Become King Bob, the First,
Of England
The day Africa became the
Solitary super-power in the
World,
All ideas had to be filtered
through the bongo-
of Gabon’s Omar Bongo
The world danced the conga to Congolese drums-
And to no-one else’s tunes.
Subsidies had to die,
Maize was mined, coffee sold
By the barrel,
And the proceeds flowed to
the rightful African farmers
Star-Bucks was declared
Illegal,
And it CEO exiled to Loki-Taung!
The UN Headquarters was
Moved to Conakry,
And the GOP had to operate
Out of Mogadishu
Berlusconi was charged with
Propaganda propaganda and
Baloney,
And sanctions placed on Italy
to force regime change.
Yes, the day Africa became
the only super-power,
It gave aid to the Bronx and other American ghettos,
To get White Youth out of crime and Suburban poverty
Bling-bling, too, was banned and blasted off to Saturn’s Rings
As the world, collectively, came out of its intellectual slum
To recognize the New World Order
SALUTING BOOTS, GUNS AND HELMETS

On the 2,000th death

of an American soldier in Iraq

a benchmark to the Pentagon

agony to the family.

I watched a U.S Remembrance

Marines lined up

before scare-crows of boots, guns and helmets

saluting the ‘remains’ of ‘our former, fallen comrades.’

And I thought-

“what if the scare-crows were to salute back?

The dead boot (now undusted) stamp down

And the trigger finger snap ‘salut-E!’

releasing a round of gun-fire

all around the town?”

What would the military brass then say,

“live marines were killed by ghostly

friendly-fire!”?

Or did they, in death-
defect, become in-surgents

wait to be stripped, dusted, raised
the stand-straight in ambush
of the sergeants
and if these scare-crows are comrades
then why the heck are they naked?

(Yes, covering their metallic bods
with their clothes
would have brought death too close
home. Preja vu for salut-E troops.
Uniforms are but Khakhi and cotton
And when blown up they get torn
cling onto blood, meat bone
like a puppy with a bone)!

Back in Washington-
Bone-head Duby a say
“we still have a mission”
Best way to honour those boyz
is to simply go on!”

Yes. The ceremony of raising the American flag must continue in Iraq
The ritual of saluting helmets
is but just a part of the rites. As for Bush,
That’s what “those boyz” are
a mere breathing marching collection
of Boots, Guns and Helmets
DEAD DREAMS OF DEDAN KIMATHI

In your short and violent

Heroic life

Having shot dead

The dread demons

Of the third Reich

You still saw

Swastika

Flying over the Gikuyu gulags

Of our homeland, Kenya

In the black forests

Of Mau and Tinderet

You formed and led

The Mau Mau

And faced British Tinder

Who ate who, in 1952

Is a question, still, for history

In the grainy

Black and white documentary

They made of you

You look at the skies

And lie still

Your lower body encased
In grey blanket
For them, you are a curiosity
A leopard
Under the hunters’ net
Still, they are afraid
When you, occasionally,
Glance at them
They step back
As if you may leap up
Tear free of the manacles
And, once more, rip empire’s heart,
What you fought for,
Field Marshall?
So that we shall
Be free—or for a Kimathi Street
statue? Your body still lays lost,
Interred, incarcerated
In a lost grave somewhere in Kamiti
Prison beyond a Metaphorical horizon
-and our dreams-
lost and misplaced alongside your
body.
Still—there will be a statue.
FREEDOM
Freedom is my kingdom
To keep.

Freedom don’t come cheap.

Freedom isn’t just servicing lip,

Or something shot from the cowboy’s hip.

Freedom was detention suspended,
The sword of Damocles’ up-ended,

Freedom never was a chain-saw gang,
Cutting up quarry for Garang.

Freedom is a girl after the school-bell has rang,
Running on exported air,

Freedom is the beer a free man drinks,
Without a care, or a hair off kilter.

Freedom isn’t a killer,
Jeep-ing about in Freetown.

Nor is it bestial, borstal mood
Found in Uncle Moody’s institutions.

Freedom is the smile painted on a clown,
The pen guided by a poet’s intuition.

Freedom is my kingdom to keep,
And it don’t’ come Changhai cheap.
BLACKMISCHIEF

Sisina’s sin, it seems
Is that he had no idea
Where Naivasha ends,
And England begins.

So he crossed the invisible line
Between here and there........
Between Monarchy and Kenya,
Between peasantry and pleasantry
Between being the heir to colonial history
And being the heir to colonial history
And being a black with the traditional zero sum legacy
(we Africans can trace our ancestry right back to our parents).

Sisina crossed the line
That divides the territory
Between being bound by the law
And being a grazing god to whom
The law is neither here nor there
And penal codes are but hot air
(as viewed from Derwent-ic attics,
or balloon sundowners) just bally-hoo

In the lands of white gods
Those who cross the line
Are apes, robbers or goats
To be summarily shot.
(They who cross the line'
says the invisible sign,
'walk into the line of white fire-
and become black ghosts')

The Cholmondley Chronicles could always
Being,
Not "I had a farm...." but
"I shot someone in Africa."

Epilogue: " and if the black ghosts haunt
You, don't sweat it
Just exorcise 'em! Through the ancient
Exercise ritual of
Nolle prosequi."
RECOR DING STATEMENTS

I walk, in through these corridors
Coated
Not with Dura coat
But the sour smell of human sweat and distress,
Call us the defenestration dentists

Sit down,
On this wooden chair
Made by an ignorant carpenter
Who couldn’t quite tell his T-joint, from his tendons
Ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies,
That’s his blood, that’s rusted over there.

Yes, the air is stale
But the fan was a donation from the Soviet Union
Back when onions and gramophones, were all the rage

Here’s pen and paper
Pretend it is KCSE
Or you’re penning your memoirs
And write me everything
From the reservoirs of memory
About the story
What we care if the light’s too dim? It’s you who’s dim
Give us a little background
Dig a few boreholes
Name your sources.

Do you work for Saturn?
Coz you were spotted entering
A flying saucer, last Saturday

The photos are in a light-room
Back here-yes, next to the windows
No, this ain’t an attic-dungeon
It’s the bludgeon room- high up from the ground
Where we extract- teeth and statements
Through harassment, and statements
Gong round and round and round
And if you get giddy we defenestrate
And record another suicidal degenerate.
COLONIAL GHOSTS....

Long lost in this hallowed walls

where halls lie polished unalloyed

and bar-men in black and white vests

and Kamba voices, and a servile air

drag rail-road porter-wheels behind their coat-tails

are the ghosts

of old colonials

from 1927, and 1901,

still dreaming of sippin' Tonic and Gin

Toxic ghosts from a Toxic age

when racism was all the rage.
WELLIME’S POST HUMOUS JOB

(Dec 3 Sun-06)?

Wellime was appointed treasure of WUCST
Western College of Science and Technology
by Kibaki
only, he’d been dead and buried for
a fort-night.

Oh well,
Wellime still gets the job
To keep stock of souls in the after life
to keep a balanced books of rights and wrongs
and tell St. Peter who goes to hell.
And for how long.

Wellime will be charge of the after life accounts
and badge money for milk and honey
he’ll single source from K.C.C
and see to it that the bee-keepers
of the after life
are kept un-stung and happy.
Mostly, at the treasury,
He’ll be in charge of other people’s memories to
treasure these
and to cherish
the good old earth days
till ODM-kicks Kibaki out
And give a royal Luo
this post-humous post
This X-mas sees a hip of trouble
In Lake Naivasha
The hippos have split
Into two opposing camps
There are the hip-hop hippos
Who've gotten above themselves
They no longer wallow in the mud
And they wear "bling bling" rings

Then there are the hippie hippos
Who wear their hair long,
They are filthy, they think it's still 1966,
And they enjoy the frequent hypo-dermic fix.
The hip-hop hippos think they are hip and hype
The hippie hippos think the hip-hop hippos are hypocrites.

That is the jive, that is the dive,
That has caused the great divide
This X-Mas
Between the hip-hop,
And the hippy hippos
Of lake Naivasha.
THE POETRY POLICE

In-between Deviant
And Partington streets,
I am stopped by the sirens
Of the Poetry Police.

"Ok, mister," they bawl on the fog-horn
"step out of your Limerick,
with your hands against the metaphor.

There is the tang of irony in your breath
And your eyes glazed with imagery."

My fingers, they say, smell of allegory
And they search my back-pockets for an
Illegal stash of Genius.

Now, they bark, walk the pentameter
But if you cross the perimeter,
We’ll shoot.” (Poetry doesn’t stop bullets,
This is not the Matrix. Poets aren’t Marxists).

They shall charge me,
With writing while under the influence of thinking!
When I run out of poetic tricks
I shall commit syntax.
Ferry my body out in a Verse,
And bury me, in the symmetry.
TO KILL A MOCKING FART....

You clench your buttocks
and if it escapes, any-way,
you crush it like the Hungarian revolution
(of '56)
by squeezing it into the sofa
to kill a mocking man
you have go to have a gun
preferably Russian
you just clench finger
against the trigger
and
‘POW’
the man is gone!

still, the mockery remains
chirping incessantly
like a stubborn pigeon
outside your window
WHACK

Kuala Lumpar

Whack is the crack
that fell off the back of your truck
as you tried to nego-tia-te your way
into Kuala Lumpar.

Whack is the ho that gave you the gono
As you found your way from Damascus to Ololo

Whack was the crack of the mother-fucking gun
After you'd scaled Shimo la Tewa and were on the run
The long run to Freedom Kingdom

Whack was the thwack who you thought was hot
coz her photo on the inter-net was taken in the dark

Whack was all your ideas on S&M
when they found you dead in the bed at seven after 'heaven'

Whack was what whack is and had always been
back in the dark fuck huck and a man called Jack
having run out of luck stuck in the muck with a nag
called Mag who you wish she had a hockey puck in her mug
FORMULATING METAPHORS

When poets walk in
Through poetry’s allegorical doors
Do they take the time
Like cooky mathematicians
To formulate metaphors?

Do they say
“Hey, this is the emotional I feel
and can I quickly capture it
In simile?”

Is poetry
A copy facsimile
Of tragedy? Or the ghost of a smile
Lost- in the woods of metaphor

Could it be like working
Plaster or alabaster
That if you couldn’t sculpture
Your feelings in perfectly crafted words
then the Emotions- would remain raw?
Is formulating metaphor
Like working with a Word Saw
And if one failed to do it to the right quantities
And an earth-quake, 8.7 on the Richter,
Came along
All your feelings would collapse
(Like that building on Nyamakima)
Making your ‘nervous break-down’
Really an emotional swan-song
Of all you ever, once were?
MOSQUITO-51

A random sequence of sentences
meandering aimlessly turn the page, turning into nowhere
the collision of a UV and a truck off highway 51-
as the latter overturned on the former

I use mosquitoes for bookmarks
shut my books hard as they circle, in-coming for blood
the last one marks a pusateri work like an autograph-
the signature of a well known sanguinary artist Phyllis-fiesta
(‘Stalin’)

you seldom get mile-age from being a poetic sage
not in this age when hip-hop is all the rage
‘Antique’-this is how they describe the literary cage
that they keep us locked up in (savage)

The mosquitoes kept buzzing around our naked torsos
curious visitors on a go- slow come to see our show
‘Oh’ they whispered in low-low voices, ‘there is so or so’
our own little corners of literary Guantanamo!
IMMORTAL

All in all,
to be immortal
was to be in the public eye
to sigh, say, and be seen
and never say "good-bye"

I am the unsung poet
because the musicians sing about hip-hop and kapuka
Na bado sija-vuka, sakafu!

I don't write poe-try about them either.

I live life as if it were a mirage
I look at the rear-view mirror
and see me still in it.

The future always lies behind us.

I look among the stars
and struggle to see the faces of the immortals
Deciphered within the constellations-
Lakini wapi?

all the heroes and heroines lie beneath the ground
we tread on their faces when we ignore the warning
and “step on the grass”

The face of my skin is pressed against skull
as I feel the gale, of time—rushing by—
I was never boring, I was never dull
nevertheless—I must cry “good-bye”
THE DREAM OF DEVIL VERA

Last night Devil Vera dreamt the dark dream again

As the rain pounded hard pain against the soft grain –

The one where, Le Devil Vera,

visited Vera in her chemotera, ward/and wiped the Chimeras out of her lackluster hair

“Hey, lassie, you never heard of zoe, gloey, good for burning people’s heads?”

The one where the doctors all held long needles

and the nurses came in brasseries equipped with long nipples

They read out her temperature from severely long thermometers

they read it in Braille because the fluorescent lights

were blinding/they said when she died they’d bury her in brasil,

because, after this, there’s nothing she’d feel.

(not even when /carnivore rolled down the Ama-zan)

And ,oh, how the hospice – smells of liquorice-

and how the corridor walls are splattered in horse-shit

when Dura Coat gets too expensive /horse-shit will do just fine

and, oh, how everything here is so nice it’s all so Chinese,

walls full o’mice, and full meals o’rice .

Last night Devil Vera dreamt of driving the old red Sierra

driving it into a shop that said ‘coca cola’

with a green simu ya jamii,manned by a jinni
Whose name was simply, mammie!

The jinni would be jimmi-jammed, and he’d call jamii for free.

Devil ra will die and lie in the grass
and I will visit for a while, and lie above it,
thinking of the time we crossed thighs and shared a hit-
and the way pot-heads merged, and floated above that shit.

In October
When Devil Ra was an illusion, and I a cloud
rather like a meteorologist’s predication-ment-
everything was perfect.

Now all I can think of is how the Taliban can throw stone
Of how it is to feel a Munguki sword cutting thru bone
Or how a Baghdad boy who is no brain, but all big skull bone
Swings a Molo-tov cock-tail, through the curvature of rage
(I only throw wood/that means/I’m good)!

Last night I dreamt of Groznyy
and how it is to be decapitated by a Chechen who is blood-horny
and left on the steps of a cathe-dral, God for-sook long ago.
Moscow: It was New Year’s Eve and we had skied 55 days thru snow

with two cousins-one long dead, one living just for show

at a flat party I recited dirty poetry that attracted Miss Sharapova

She said—“Oh, we’re out of white wine, but there’s plenty of Popov!”

And we drank and drank. My god, we drank. How we drank
TRANS-PORTING

When Benjamin
was one-
We used to walk home coz mom
was in hos-pital

Or rather
the house-help
Peninnah
carried him, and I,
all of five
hopped aboard,
static trains
grounded on the sun-set
rails
going nowhere.

Then there was the day
in Upper Hill
when the two of us
floated on air...like shooting stArs
we discussed ‘The Wall- Flowers’
and as I walked on down, onto town,
Ben turned right/down onto where the flowers,
wreaths, really, grow
and like proud cloaks are draped on old soldiers’ graves.

Is this all we’ve been doing all this time,
just Trans-potting?
many memories-
and many stories,
not yet told.
That ne’er may be told.

Now on this six p.m.
with a green fly
In my red wine
and some one else’s blood
In the brother’s veins-
(are we really flesh and blood,
or skeletons, and history, torn?).
I think of Ben
gazing at this sun-set
through eternity’s eyes
and something
In me.....dies.
I still re-call him,
in a faded photo,
staring passively
at the shutter eye
of a 1980 camera
In an Egypt Army
imitation uniform.

Like a little man
Playing a cameo role
in life.
LITTER-ATI

Northern cities
are glitterati-

New York, I was told,
holds the Big Apple
and my little brother
little, is Big
in London

Paris, the paparazzi
tells me-
is the city of love
(and he’s glitterati)

While Spain
is a Big Bucket of Champagne
(in Spain-
they do not do
Beckett)

Maybe Beckham

I lived in a sub- city
where sub-urbia
does not exist
for utopia
there’s Ethiopia
a dead camera-man’s
Vision-of famine
(our souls-bellowed Bellow
and our bellies/so hollow they were!)
not the mamas
Of Addis, Ababa
nor Aden’s Eden, or Eden’s Aden
but Bin Laden’s men! The ardent men of Bin Laden.

In the city of litter
nothing glitters-
not even the glitter
on the women’s collective face!

In the place
where I come from
everything is strewn
and ‘life is strong’
Like sugarless strungi
(that’s “strong tea” but
the luhyas miss-ed out on
The English accent)
ST PETERSBURG

In the surreal city of your birth:

Blindened by your brilliance and the stark St Petersburg light

There, again, I found my heart, walking against Russian rain.

Spinning off Sixth Kazanskaya and into the Nevsky Prospekt

I could have been a Miji Kenda Kaya

Or seen Eternity’s prospects speckled in silver against your beard. (If life is a rapid, then we’re riding on kayak).

But in an Irish Pub, called The Office, watching the
World Cup, with a giant
called Timor
Or dancing at the Mafioso-
damned Dacha, or drinking
vodka at Fort Ross
I dread a golliwog bearing a
rose, or a Lolita with blonde
tresses giving me a secret
address
Then undressing the secret
alphabets of Russian
crylyrics.

And you, Lossel, with an iota
of genius
Having your name
constantly misspelt by paper
editors, like the flower Lotus
.....
Whose real name is “iotus!”
Still I see in my dreams some
nights...St. Petersburg.
BAD MORNING LADY
Miss Atlas,
A regular Vasco da Gama
Of the night
Lies perplexed
Upon peaked mountains
That hold no views

She's a wholly compete
Smithereens-of-Something, un
Known
The answer to a Question
No-one asks.

She's mascara
Spread out like the booty
Of a pitched battle, never fought.
A detergent Ad
Whose message did not get across

She pretends to be asleep,
But her eyes are lips, asking,
"why do they always leave me alone,
With the coming of the first lights of
dawn?"
ROCK OF RAGES

At 12.12 past noon I padded like a light-weight lithe bear through the cold and bare floor of your dying room feeling the cold seeping up my bones sapping the life out of me I lit your unfinished cigarette, re-lit it really and thought of abbreviated life......

I thought of how we, the other we, used to rock back and forth foam and froth back and froth till dawn came up across the horizon.

The morning streets always were cold and wet and puddles red with sunrise and I felt like a man living in a canvass painted by a genius who was the one really living my life and merely ‘drawing’ inspiration from me

He dreamt my dreams and defecated my shit and lived a parallel life with you, one on which you were living not dying He played bass guitar and told my jokes and laughed the way I would if I were real may-be you even had two daughters and my dog

Then rage fermented into rocks and it rolled around our living room like thunder ....and blew and tore ......the canvass asunder
PERSPECTIVES

She

who lights neon

in

my heart

called to say

she couldn't quite find

the location of my place

because my building moves by night

Perspective-

it is for the same reason

she does not see my face

in morning light
ETERNITIES APART
She’s the one who listened to Dido
but I cried the tears alone
in mezzo-soprano
(softly, into the night, not ready or willing to disturb her sleep.)
whenever I held her
with my heart melting into her back
she thanked God
for
never buying that hot-water bottle.

Sundays, I laid myself
flat back on the canopy of her perfectly pressed sheets
and let myself drift
like a bubble, into the ceiling,
till I felt all hope, burst-on contact.
and came back down to earth
not with a bang
but with a sad little sound
deflation
my dreams hissed out of me
air out of a tyre-puncture
last breath out of a dying man’s lungs
Other nights,
I roamed the furniture
listening to the sound of
distant cars

Knowing, she is in one
my darling, in effect, lost in Doppler.

For her,
we already were, Eternities Apart,
distant cosmic stars
born together
now galaxies apart
(indifferent, to my broken heart)
(I called her the cat)
She called me “sweet-heart”
but her heart wasn’t really
in the part
for her, I was already an abandoned house
over-run with vegetation, lost in the horizons
of yester-months. For me, already packed,
not quite gone, I hang around her-
like a loose emotion/or a ghost-
that just would not I get lost!
Sex is always the first casualty of a failing relationship

No—the easy jokes are the first to go. what happens?

When does the flip-flop factor kick in? It’s odd, where we are at now.

She walks, naked, into the shower. We’re still comfortable,

Like that. I iron my clothes with my dick sticking out-

Of course because my Boxers are in the rumpiled pile that’s up for ironing—....but where is the desire?

Oddly enough, it still is there.

Her nipples, I think, look like hard little koala nuts,

and her smile n eyes still slay me.

But the desire is different, resigned almost.

like a photograph from that beautiful holiday you once had, in Madagascar, or of a fast, uninsured car you once owned—that crashed, and was written off.

You walked out of the wreck, unscathed,

At least psychologically—but you’ve come to realize

You may never own such a hot ride again....

Or return to Madagascar.

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FEATHER-LITE

In the end
it was the two missing condoms
from the box that did it-
that is,
Broke the spell for me.

Looking at that soft red box
with its top, torn off-
and just one solitary CD
still inside.....

Like a rose
with missing petals.

That’s the pedal
that finally cruelly broke
my optimistic paralysis

The faint hope
that we could somehow
make things up-roll back time
reverse the scene of crime!
how-
when just a day before
her breast had been cupped
her rose petal explored
by another breast!
(at least twice!) did he buy her-
Smirnoff ice, then, look into her eyes?
(only twice)??
When in dazed horror
I protested
She just said, mildly,
“did you expect me to join a
con-vent”
and “may-be it wasn’t the first time,
so stop acting like I lost my virginity”
and “move on”
So I have-to another horizon
beyond sorrow, beyond resignation, beyond the nite
not so much because of her words
but because of the sight
of two missing.................s
the imagery, they conjured.
They may be called feather-lite

But, boy, they hurt-as hard

As being struck on the head

by two

Maasai clubs
THE REST OF OUR LIVES

Will be spend living on the edge of knives
Drugs as - Damocles’s swords
Only it will be our T-cells strang up
like hope on gallows.
Or gloomy galleries
with all our memories
sliding down, into valleys, not of our making/our own, remorse
Of when our skin was brown (The Rest of our lives, will not be our own).
Our life is a town
built into a sanken foundation
Something slightly Egyptologic
crawling beneath the arm-hair down, no logic.
Something cryptic,
the anti-thesis, to genetic-
Gothic, mystic –the cemetry’s kiss
something that erased
futur-istic bliss

I re-call the time at the Muheti Crescent Park
when we lay back
And listen to Linkin Park
The place where the dew
caressed me and you

with morning’s hue. The colours streaming in, in phantasmagorical shades, allegorical
-
The grass cut us with its lime-green blades

slashing our shoulder blades-

we were joint—not at the hips — but at the shoulders. Siamese twins destined to die

Tell me Babylon, when was the horizon
ever so close?

-why did we live life

in twilight’s zone?

Our breath was a cartoon bubble

the life we could have had only visible through Hubble

troubles encrypted in the stars

far far away

life as living death-(indecipherable)

We breath-ed in an artificial breath

shared it, and hoped for sustenance. Siamese twins as shattering substance

-Funny to think

of ourselves as protein, wrapped in skin.

That stinks-

and, oh well, nobody but George Orwell

is buy-ing.
THE PHYSICKS OF
GROWING UP

In the theory of pyromania
there’s a principle called attrition
on the farthest line of stretch
from event horizon.

(we are pysicks!)

if event horizon
is us when we’re born

then the physicks
of attrition
are us grown old and sick
and in need of nutrition.

The nurse with yummy breast
is called Y-vette
her body/feels like velvet
we make sex, after she feeds me suet
against the nursing home’s creaky bed
(and white sheet)
when I split her, like dry-firewood, she screams
and I have to cap her mouth with palm
so we do not wake up other patients

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Not!
The nurse with yummy breast
Is not called Y-vette, or p’haps she is-
my old eyes have cataract/cannot quit make
Out what name in her badge says
(probably something pedestrian-or nurse-ish-like ‘Gwendolyn’)
She plays the violin.

Not! Maybe she does, but I’ve gone half deaf
the only thing, I hear.... in these twilight years
is the rapid filibirjuster of my heart-beat
(and it is irregular)!
I do not know if ‘Yvette’ has yummy breast
(but there’s a bulge up there somewhere) maybe/she’s PG
or if she feels like velvet. (I am an Ole Dirty Bass
I would dare feel her up if I wasn’t half paralyzed
waist up) ‘Yvette’ probably does NOT
play the violin - but she regularly administers
the insulin, that controls the blood sugar level in my vein
Or something, something - (I could not quite hear, what the GP said)
actually, our relationship with Yvette, is quite maudlin!
It is based on - wheelchairs/and the forgetful Sanskrit-of Alzhrmers....
(Yvette scraping us a long, over the linoleum)
but I am saving up, bits and part,
of my breath / to take her for a last holiday
at the end of the year
to Mausoleum.
KIEDIS

I heard on radio the other day
that - going by diet, lifestyle and calculations of past drug abuse,
my favourite rock star would die in 20-17

Going by own tabulations-
based on past family death, destiny and medical condition
I, too, have worked out the date of my death.

I will die on the morning of February Nine,
the year will be 2009-

exactly three months short of my 34th Birthday.

I’ll be in hospital with a plastic drip
drip-drip-dripping ‘life’ into my sunken skin
I will, slow-ly, fade out of view
drip-drip dripping, a sinking ship.

Having encountered my own ice-berg
Tony, the Titan, will be wrecked like the Titanic.

Fuck that!
I will die like a rock-star
on morphine, O.D, a full bottle of vod-ka
I will rent a hotel room
And borrow a whore-
So that we do not
drip-drip drip away
out of the drift of days.
THE HENDRIX EQUATION

You, too, played air guitar
strumming invisible notes into the night
trying to communicate to stars
which are the frozen cadavers of gods gone cold.

You too, wrote of castles in the sand
Swept away into the cold blue sea
we were the castles-you and me-
Beauty, in the middle of life’s debrii.

Life is roses, and cacti,
and having lost that which is dearest to thee
There is the sense of detachment.

“Nothing really matters, anymore”
a drying wade whispered / and closed a door.

far away, maybe in Mauritius
maybe in Seychelles-
there’s a better shore for... both of us.

I still gather sea-shells
And listen to their whispers
Saying “all will be well.”
WHISPERS

(For Wahome Mutahi)

the conversation, once loud and uproarious,
is now sank to whispers.....
only the memory-
of laughter and your stories, lingers
-like a silver-cobweb clings
on a broken wall lit by silver moonlight
the glass has grown
cold and moist in our hands
even as the beer grows warm
as your memory. Understand-
life is never echoed, past plays,
cannot be re-staged in future days
the way they first were........
only the ghost of happiness
Peers through the citrus, and us,
who saw the stars whisper,
the way the horse-whisperer, does
still see the wisps of life curl away
from us, as they did for you,
like the secret alphabet of smoke
between fingers. Nothing really lingers,

save the faint ghost of smiles,

you left behind, on faces; before going miles,

to other far-off theatrical places,

where no-one, forgets heir lines,

or losses the plot-in good, old Kony Pot.

(Not even Oppoti-the emperor of lost causes).
SAD DODO

A girl I knew once told me
that I thought it was “cool” to be sad
and spitting Dido at me she told me I’d end
my life dead as a Dodo

No—I’ll end it as an extinct volcano, as Dambudzo
having sailed my canoe
Over the rapids of LIFE,
over the ocean horizons of Madagascar.

I lived life as a fast car, & crashed out!

The say English – or was it Portuguese – soldiers
shot at the dodos, thinking them geese-
and in the process-rendered the exquisite, extinct

It could not happen now, with all the NGOs, distinct
that make sure endangered species, do not pass GO.
my life is a monopoly of one/and it is worth just 200 pounds
altho’ I weigh considerably less than that – a diminishing work of-art
I wish my life fell under E. S. category
then no English-or Portuguese – soldiers
would be tempted to use Sad Dodo/ as Farget Practise fodder.
INFINITE MYSTERY

When I said “ciao”
in that lonely West bar called Jeans
at sun-rise
and swore upon, the crimson dawn
that I could never fall for anyone again
how could I have known,
that I’d meet Sharon?

When my heart carried iron
and I said I was jaded, as an old diamond, faded
how could I have began to understand irony?

The Infinite mystery
of twi-light
“Hi” said she-
and what was meant to be, will be
The Infinite mystery, of destiny

Sometimes old affairs end at sunrise
and at night, in the rain
new love begins – I tell you
like a morning flower’s petal/opening in the dew
EQUITY

A commercial poem

When the history of Kenyan banks is written
Equity Bank will come out as the lion
That other banks thought was a kitten.

Barclays, Barclays,
Once-upon-an-con-gone, a bank of loan delays
immensely improved on its feet of clay
When equity gave little people a loan-in-a-day.

Somedays,

    Stanchart charted the usual banks
    but Equity sailed unstancharted waters
    and into the deeper seas, of ocean Equity
    where the treasures lay.

Hey, it is those 'poor' folk

    who keep money under mattresses
    and live in non-tree-lined residences
    that Equity address.............
LAST POEM

For a long time, you’ve rented a room up in my head
and moved in there with little, but your clothes and our old bed.

For a long time you’ve occupied a space in my heart
and laid siege from there using an arsenal of memories

for a long time you’ve haunted everything that I’ve touched
and suffused, and tainted, with long gone years-

Words have hurt like swords! Poetry too-
now, I’m bringing in, the auctioneers.

They’ll toss out the bed, burn the car in the lot,
I’ll watch the flames leap up like sex spasms........

Our memories, like a burnt photo album will only remain
bitter and acrid and faint, and then only when the wind
blows.............

and this is my last poem this is my last poem,
to you.
HUMMER

Humuor me – with a Hummer
which has a humidor
for my cigar
and a humid meter
to measure one humidity, outside,
and the lack of humility, inside,
that is me.

Humour, me with a Hummer
because the Hammer
I ordered for, from Detroit
to pound my enemies
into smithereens
was not delivered.
(just like those votes
in the ballot boxes).

Humour me with a Hummer
the transportation of choice
for pimps, druglords, MCees and
other wanna – bes’/like MC Hammer.
Let me ‘hema’
my way through Kenya
With a Hummer
because
quite frankly
I am tired of the ‘Tinga Tinga Tractor’

That I have been driving all these years.
like a jinga - and that has taken me - nowhere, slowly.
TEETH

I think of teeth
big giant teeth
like fleas
  - a dog barks
foam forms
    its language
from here henceforth
will be clean.
Omo,
  also occurs,
a cow,
  among the Oromo
I am not cowed.
  I roam
the vast savannah
  of the Sevengeti
and wait to encounter
  a yeti.
Yet
  the teeth
do not go away.
They haunt
the August head
thirty two old white tombs
marking their
won demise.
Like the romance
of Africa
gone wrong......
Or missing
In action
Like the decayed, milk teeth.
we once lost when we still had innocence.
(THE SIXTY SIXTH POEM)

By Ben Heaven

Silence my fear, oh please, silence my fear.
The darkness is near, bringing hell far too close,
Down here.
There’s a strange kind of twilight,
Caressing my soul tonight
The darkest hour is afloat,
The promise of death, on a cheap stool,
Pale memories - interrupted.
Pain that can’t/won’t be endured,
I see o blood, but I know I’m bleeding bad.
Winter refused to end, from whence there’s no recall.
Blue-black frost bitten fingers,
Tell me I’ve been dead so long in history.
Digits used to curl up swift to harden fists,
That’s just like the fighter, I remember him
Blue and black suggest I gave up somewhere along the line
The somewhere you realize you can’t write four ever,
Like they spelt it in school, yesterago.
The place where they first realized, I may not be worth the fight any more.
But hey, was that me, just me?
This is my darkest hour.
Drifting, drifting along.
On metallic stool
Underneath murky skylight,
Waiting for another day to die
Six o’clock and the sun gathers a crimson blanket
She is ready for slumber
Six thirty and the walls just draw in tighter around my skull.
Another drink and I’m only further down.
Another drink and I’m almost worn out
I should be dying, but I’m out too late.
I should be thinking, I can’t concentrate.
I should be running, but I’m hemmed into this black empty fate, at any rate.
Maybe just maybe everyone of us,
Every woman, child and man,
Has a black empty place,
Where they can’t even write four, let alone ever,
Cause deep inside is just a space,
That can only be filled with bitter lessons we may learn,
To bring us closer.
To the dark nightmare in the wind tonight.
This is my darkest hour.
All the memories tell a different lie.
In between is a different truth,
That make me say the last goodnight,
Which is more than I don’t know,
What I do know is that life is too short to be afraid.
And yesterday can always be tomorrow interrupted
And tomorrow interrupted will always be filled with yesteryears,
And how to hold the little things a little closer,
How to pull them a little nearer,
I see their exquisite beauty,
You see I’ve always been an artist
And smile at dead fingers,
Death too can be art.
And say the words I’ve been willing to hear,
Even if the single tear, running off my eyeball,
Tells me these words are mine, not yours
To say to me to the end of time.
I know the words are empty, everything’s empty.
The dark blackness will always whisper,
And I’m falling through this abyss,
But then again, everybody falls sometimes.
This is my darkest hour.
Scents, foul stench of lost night’s brandy, today’s,

Mingling with the cry of the wind.

Stinking with every breath exhaled

Inhale and a pale shade of nothing - interrupted,

Tomorrow interrupted.

Hello, did you miss me?

I always wondered if hell was down there.

It was right here with us all along.

You haven’t managed to die yet?

Nice to meet you too,

Now I’ll have to wash my hand like mama taught me to.

We spent the evenings down here,

We’re still getting by, aren’t we?

Me lady, don’t leave just yet,

I’ll walk you through the memories.

Just keep breathing human and I’ll keep talking.

You silence was always pitiful - anyway.

And I’m still trying to get to grips with - what are you?

,Cause in my darkest hour,

You’re still there.

No, it’s not in my head.

We used to hang out with just hangovers to worry over.
Nights under twinkling lights and latest hits.
Dawns we’d be so high I believed we were flying.
Only then would that lipsticked flesh part.
You screamed “I so rule,
“But you can run through fire?” a premonition maybe.
I see then, I see now, and now I wonder...
Does she cry herself to sleep?
I wonder how you sleep or if you easily forget.
I wonder how you sleep or if you came to terms with your past.
Maybe just maybe, you can leave it at last
Always a silencer, go back girlfriend,
Forget cheap thrills and superwoman before she blocked out,
Forget seven day weekends and nights on the rave.......
Nobody cried.
We were young, we were reckless,
We were young we were wild,
We were young, we were free,
We were young,
We wanted things that were just out of reach,
We were young,
We really believed someday we would fly.
Because we were young, we were stupid,
We were young and we were wrong.

So Rest in Hell, honey, the devil always rated us,

You could prop up in the reserve seat of hell’s bar,

I’m sure,

You had an extraordinary talent for sin,

And you were in a trance thinking you shouldn’t die alone.

Save a bottle of brandy in case I get admitted.

Take a pill and dull the pain,

Life was a sickness without a cure,

You didn’t have to be vengeful,

It’ll get us anyway.

You don’t have to take the blame,

Because you were cursed, cursed since your birth.

And all your worst fears were bound to come true, anyway.

That’s the reason your hellos always sounded so *bon voyage*.

And your smile was never superwoman’s

It was that of a blind psycho woman’s,

Running around in circles - insane.

Keep on saying nothing.

The silence shields the pain.

This is my darkest hour.
She’s not there and she’s still there,
She’ll take the blame if I’ll keep the peace,
Sing her a love song then change the topic,
Tell her a story where God stands by the sun,
And there’re angles to gather around us,
And the tears from the fears,
Flow in a river that whispers her name
And all the choices she made are not the same
Where we all change with a thousand dreams,
That we can still believe in, and
Our lives are without hurt or entanglement and
Our lives are without death or the demons in our head.
"Wait a minute darling,
I see the place, that space that is so vacant inside.
Four ever and the fairy tales in my head that have run dry.
My life is short, make it easier to follow through that,
Don’t say it’s never too late, or some doors don’t shut.
Don’t say we’ve got the stars directing our fate.
I’m sailing on a sunken sky,
I try to read the stars, I don’t know what they mean.
I try to listen hard to what you’re saying,
And I realize I’m listening to silence.

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That I show I know I've lost my soul.

This is my darkest hour.

Only you can see the darkness,

In this blinding bright glow,

Of tonight's red twilight skies,

I often think we were born to die.

So hold me, dear, that I may feel some human touch.

And believe in Descartes once more:

"I think therefore I... (should be concentrating)... am"

Keep smiling Me ghost lady, there may be some recall,

'Cause memories fade but I think I loved you,

And that's the truth.

Even though all you left are ghastly realizations,

Someone drinking to death, someone you busted,

I'll flash another for this black empty soul you filled.

Yes dear, word gets round like hell,

Gather a crowd and what a speck when you spit?

You once imagined a speck could so rule,

Did you figure a speck could also so split?

Did you witness the next scene? - remember that.

Did you sit back and reflect some?

Think perhaps all your shows were all good for nobody?
Rewind and rewatch the final act at the cemetery,
Resee the grimaced, lipsticked flesh, shut up four ever,
And rehear it whisper untold terror in the wind.
You could have been a star, haunted heart
Made a block buster with that last act
Not all your shows were all good for nobody.
Now that was you, a buster,
That was you, your personal best,
Should have been on a spotlight,
On your darkest hour.

This is my darkest hour,
Write me off your list.
There’s nothing left to say, and my glass is empty - anyway,
Just like the seat, where you’d once been.

And I’m starting to doubt, even the things that I’ve seen.
So it’ll be easier, to pretend we never met.
Given time we will surely forget.
Fear not though, don’t despair,
I’ve still got your name tattooed on my blood
And I’m still here, and I’m cursed.
Cursed like you, dear
PAMPERS AND PAEDIATRICIANS

My literary editor thinks
That by skipping the having of babies
I’m almost off the line, with deadline.

It’s what my old pal, Ogutu Eliud,
used to say as he sipped busaa from a gourd

“Mochama, my boy....... Vodka
burns a young man’s mitochondria.”

In stentorian tones like one reading the Iliad

I will elope

with a girl called Penelope

I’ll trap spermatozoon

in an envelope

and then wait to give birth to a ‘Jeff Muthee’

Cartoon.

“Mzee,” Penelope will say,

“it is time/for pampers

and pediatricians.”

I am kosher

With all those numbers
Meanwhile, while nothing hampers
Heaven/I'll keep shooting blanks

From my tasty A.K-47
BUILDING HOUSES

Two couples, two of them spouses spoke of building houses.

The man wants a mansion somewhere in Karen

the woman thinks a condominium would be heaven.

One couple just wants the minimum condom, and a couple of minutes.

The woman worries that when the kid grows and marries

she will be all alone in that lonely mansion.

The man reckons (lovely) there will be tenants to keep up the fun ....

Just like the ad

"You're my home-boy, my boy,

can I come and chill at your digs

(which is, really, my digs) –

and bring along 'Prison Break' – Season Three?"

I think of the house my mother build,

the cosy nest, in Nairobi West,

And the concrete oblong in Ngong.. -

(and then, wonder, if I should rhyme house with mouse).

(tell me, Miss Mousy Mouse,

will you be mine?"
Next time, in my cute little house of pine?

The man says at sixty

Miss 'Thirte-fae' will regret not building a house

In the boondocks, complete with electricity ...

"Believe you me," he says (sic), "in twenty years,

When you retire, at 55...you will... believe you me."

Believe you me, at sixty, I'll have a cosy little house

Six feet deep in foundation, and a cute little mouse

To keep me company / in my dacha of pine
WILDLIFE SONG

I was strolling through the Serengeti,

When a buffalo said “hallo” to me,

“I play the cello,” it said.

“I smoke grass,” I replied. “Hallo?”

Strolling farther into the Serengeti,

A wild rhinoceros charged me,

“I collect taxes,” it said –

“and it is my sacred duty to charge you VAT.”

“Watt?” said I, “only the elephant,

Can collect tusks.”

The elephant,

A pachydermis suffering hepatitis

Was dosing outside, a Serengeti library

“I am a databank,” he said – serenely,

“I store all the old memories, of the Serengeti –

Especially those of those who perished,

Of meningitis!”

My pride was intact when I wandered into,

A pack of lions, out in the Savannah.
They embraced me, as if I was a king
Just come free, of Alcatraz, sing sing.
Roar, roar – whoa! And blao wow,
They drank my brain, and washed it with rain ...
My brain, my brain – they ate my brain,
The way a donkey eats bran!
“A leopard does not change its spots,”
I said to the leopard that wanted to eat me

for sport

“neither does a poet!” said leopard,
And pounced
(I do not enjoy being eaten by anything dressed in leotards).

Zebra, she was easy,

“wear your pajamas,”
she said

“and come to bed!” Zzz Zzz.
In the pantheon of pathos...

taking white wine at three in the afternoon
from a dark waitress so thin
she could be a tooth-pick
but, maybe she’s just the lean meat
eaten at the once opulent Six Eighty Hotel
opposite

eaten, make no bones about it, raw
a marabou stork now serving guinnesses stout
in the hot-and shady-grounds of human carcass
Where skinny Chinese men and old Caucasian intermix
like UNEP (United Nations End Perverts)
and workmen in the blue overcoats pick-pockets-
I see, out of the corner of my socket
a young girl who is about to simmer out like a broken rocket
and become the centre-piece
Of my piece!
She's young, maybe fresh out of school, where school here simply means the holidays just began...

Her hair is black and bracken-
and I cannot see any innocence in those wide and hungry eyes

Nevertheless, she strives for effect by wearing a 'simply black' top and bend-up-at-the-ankles levis, to bend truths to become the lie!

and sneakers, whose combined effect makes me think of 1989

I watch her for effect through my pillars of bamboo like a leopard after a goat, for she's the flesh to my lines. You could be mine.

She, they-even those with faces pressed back into skull like wall-papers

Watch back
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