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Prison, Poetry, and Polyphony in Abdilatif Abdalla's *Sauti ya Dhiki*

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ABSTRACT

This article is a study of the prison poetry of Abdilatif Abdalla, one of the most talented twentieth-century Swahili poets. Abdalla penned his collection of poems *Sauti ya Dhiki* while serving a prison term for sedition during the Jomo Kenyatta regime in postindependence Kenya. Prison as a site for writing had tremendous influence on the form and content of his poetical productions. In this regard I suggest that, for the most part, the terribly unpleasant prison conditions that the poet experienced, enabled, and enhanced the occurrence in his poetry of a psychic or philosophical journey, which may or may not have been therapeutic, and the articulation of a whole range of "voices." I undertake a close reading of *Sauti ya Dhiki*, exploring the symbolic journey and the polyphony that characterizes Abdalla's reaction to his incarceration by what Achille Mbembe would call the "postcolonial potentate."

It is almost axiomatic that prison poetry in Africa represents polyphonic literary productions shaped, molded, or catalyzed by government repression. Government repression has become ubiquitous in Africa because of the excesses, absurdities, and banalities of what Achille Mbembe in his *On the Postcolony* (2001) has aptly characterized as the "postcolonial potentate" or "postcolonial autocrat." Almost always prison poets—namely, those who write while in prison and about their imprisonment—are unwilling state guests unable to resist the urge to write in spite of or because of their captive state. It is not that the postcolonial potentate's action to imprison them makes them poets; the vast majority of them are already accomplished poets before their incarceration.

Yet, prison as a "site for writing," as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson term it in *Reading Autobiography* (2001), has tremendous influence on the form and content of their poetical productions. Clearly, their prison poetry is a reaction to the

potentate's action of imprisoning them. In this regard I suggest that, for the most part, the terribly unpleasant prison conditions that the poets experience enable and enhance the occurrence in their poetry of at least two conditions of possibility, namely, a psychic or philosophical journey, which may or may not be therapeutic, and the articulation of a whole range of "voices"—those of the poet and those of other people. Not surprisingly, regardless of the numbers of voices they may use or adopt, the poets tend to *write back* against the postcolonial potentate responsible for their incarceration and the deplorable state of affairs in their respective geopolitical entities. Their attack on the potentate may be implicit or explicit, acerbic or mild, constant or occasional, but it is still an attack on what I call the "unattackable." Jailed poets are therefore left with no option but "to do things with words," as J. L. Austin would put it, with the written words remaining the most available potent weapon and strategy in the *agon* the poets wage with the postcolonial tyrant. It bears clarifying that although the resultant psychic poetic journey and the multiple poetic voices inherent in prison poetry are not exclusive to the ontological and existentially reality of imprisonment, yet as an unusual site for writing, prison lends itself towards self-reflection and introspection, as many studies have amply testified (see Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, and Klopp, *Sentences*). Thus, both the figurative journey and the various voices are often at work in prison poems: from the prisons of apartheid South Africa, where Dennis Brutus wrote *Letters to Martha* (1968), to the Nigerian prison in Yakubu Gowon's dictatorial era when Wole Soyinka composed "A Shuttle in the Crypt" (1972); from the Malawian prison where Jack Mapanje wrote *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (1993) to the Kenyan prison where Alamin Mazrui wrote *Chembe che Moyo* (1984) under the tyrannical regime of Daniel arap Moi.

The prison poetry of these inmates, who are often locked up for political reasons, seems to affirm the view that the forced introspection engendered by imprisonment plays a significant role in the creation of the literary genre of prison poetry. Clearly, writing for these prisoners constitutes a perilous act of defiance of the "postcolonial potentates" on the continent. Sadly, Africa has had more than its fair share of such autocratic potentates. Commentaries on the postcolonial disenchantment are legion. Jack Mapanje offers a classic example in his penetrating observation on the situation that obtains in most postcolonial African states: in his edited volume of African prison writings, *Gathering Seaweed*, he says that the transition from colonial rule to flag independence did not translate into freedom. Indeed, Kenya under President Jomo Kenyatta (himself a former political prisoner in the colonial era and whose contribution Mpanje includes in his volume) was not any different in forging an atmosphere of repression that led to the imprisonment of dissidents, and the subsequent birth of postindependence prison writing in general and prison poetry in particular.

Kenyan poet Abdilatif Abdalla, whose Swahili anthology *Sauti ya Dhiki* forms the focus and locus of this study, falls within this category of prisoners of conscience across Africa for whom prison was a site for writing poetry. Abdilatif Abdalla burst onto the Kenyan public stage in the late 1960s when, then 22 and described by the media as a "revolutionary young man," he was arraigned before a Mombasa court on charges of sedition (*East Standard* 20 Mar. 1969). In the preface to *Sauti ya Dhiki*, Abdalla states with unequivocal candor that he was imprisoned because of being found guilty of writing and distributing in a number of

towns on the Kenyan coast a pamphlet titled *Kenya Twendapi?* (Kenya: Where Are We Headed?) (Abdalla xiii). As a member of Jaramogi Oginga Odinga's Kenya Peoples' Union (KPU), Abdalla had been incensed by KANU government's successful ploy to bar the opposition party's participation in both the 1966 and 1968 national elections. Abdalla's involvement in compiling and distributing *Kenya Twendapi?* along the Kenyan coast was in response to what he saw as the disenfranchising of Kenyans affiliated to KPU and hence the derailment of the democratic process in the newly independent East African nation. Moreover, he was expressing his disenchantment with the ever-dwindling freedom of expression. For this he was imprisoned and thus joined the long line of Kenya's political prisoners who include Alamin Mazrui, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Katama Mkangi, Maina wa Kinyatti, Edward Oyugi, Koigi wa Wamwere, Willy Mutunga, Wahome Mutahi, Kipkorir Merjo, George Anyona, Atieno Odhiambo, Chelagat Mutai, and Otieno Mak'Onyango. Fredric Jameson's characterization of the third world intellectual who "produces both poems and praxis" is therefore befitting of Abdalla (Jameson 25).

Like Soyinka's famous poem "A Shuttle in the Crypt" and prison memoir *The Man Died* as well as Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained*, Abdalla's *Sauti ya Dhiki* was written on toilet paper behind prison walls. This collection of poems stands as Abdalla's response to what he perceived as the government's criminalization of dissent. It encapsulates the many and varied moods and affective states that engulfed him as he figuratively journeyed in the psychic landscape that the prison ambience fostered. The poet evinced and expressed a wide range of emotions including bitterness, defiance, confidence, regret, and self-doubt as he "traveled" under the conditions of deprivation and dehumanization that this figurative prison journey occasioned. As Soyinka stated regarding his prison poetry, "the poems are a map of the course trodden by the human mind during the years of incarceration" (cited in Afejuku 21). Soyinka's conception of prison poetry as a map suggests that in such poetry readers are able to trace the inmate's mental, psychic, or philosophical journeys. As a map would consist of any number of details and destinations, many and varied are the mental or psychic courses or journeys that prison poetry contains. And as he/she journeys, he/she is also likely to dialogue with himself/herself and others or to speak in many voices.

I use Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic in explicating the significance of Abdalla's prison poetry. Bakhtin specifically locates the dialogic aspect of artistic expression in the genre of the novel. He bases his analysis on the concept of heteroglossia (linguistic variability), which typifies the novel and as a consequence tends to set it apart from the other genres. Bakhtin argues that the novel is more prone to intertextuality, since it has the capacity and capability of entertaining a multiplicity of social voices and a wide range of "links and interrelationships." Bakhtin's assessment of the stylistic elements of the novel is keenly attentive to the lack of uniformity in the novel, pointing to what he aptly describes as the "dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia (Bakhtin 32). Further, he argues that the novel contains a number of voices, which may be also seen as *different* languages that come to bear on the formation of the literary entity. A novel therefore consists of languages that are both varied and at the same time internally variegated. Based on his notion of the novel as a meeting point for these voices and languages, Bakhtin gives us his definition of the novel as: a diversity

of social speech types, sometimes even a diversity of languages and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized (32).

In focusing on the uniqueness of the individual speaking person's speech, Bakhtin is not oblivious to the fact that whatever we say does not necessarily originate with us. He argues that an individual's speech is an extension and an expansion of another person's speech. There is a sense in which an individual uses another person's speech in the novel (as in real life), but in the process individuates and transforms its earlier meaning or nuances. Thus, Bakhtin views heteroglossia as "another's speech in another's language," underscoring continuities and disjuncture in speech or utterance, characterized by retention, adaptation, and appropriation as the speech travels from one user to the next and from context to the other (40).

Following Kimani Njogu in his erudite *Reading Poetry as Dialogue* (2004), I show the relevance of Bakhtin's notions of dialogism and its concomitant linguistic variability and multivocality to other spheres of writing including prison poetry. In sum, I use Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic and heteroglossia to demonstrate the various voices that emerge in Abdalla's prison poetry as evident from his style and thematic concerns, and to show how prison as a writing site impinges on the writing. I bring to the fore the multivocality of his poetry and to demonstrate how it speaks to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. In this regard, I want to propose that the title *Sauti ya Dhiki*, loosely translated into English as "Voice of Agony," is perhaps better interpreted as multifarious voices of agony or anguish expressed by the one prison poet (Ohly 82). The multiplicity of voices is evident not only from the diversity of themes that preoccupy Abdalla, but the various stylistic and linguistic strategies he employs in his anthology. Moreover, Abdalla purports to speak for others—the underprivileged and deprived—in expressing disillusion with the illusion of prosperity in postindependence Africa in general and Kenya in particular. His *sauti*, or voice, is hence a synthesis of many voices—not a cacophony, but a polyphony through which we vicariously hear the unspoken agonies of the silent fellow sufferers or unspeaking others.

Sauti ya Dhiki is a collection of forty stanza-poems that Abdalla wrote in the period of his incarceration between September 1969 and December 1972, with only one poem in the collection, "N'sharudi" 'I Am Back,' being written after the completion of his prison term. All the poems adhere strictly to the rules of Swahili prosody. In one of his lectures at the University of Dar es Salaam in the early 1970s, Abdalla explained the reason for his insistence on prosody: "watalamu wa ushairi wa Kiswahili kwa umoja wao wamekubaliana kuwa shairi la Kiswahili ni lazima liwe na vina na mizani. Vitu hivi viwili ni kama roho ya shairi la Kiswahili" 'Scholars of Swahili poetry have unanimously agreed that the Swahili poem must have rhyme and meter. These two things are like the soul of the Swahili poem' (Chacha 34). It is not entirely true that *all* scholars of Swahili poetry concurred then or concur now with that view, unless by "all" Abdalla implies all prosodists.

It is intriguing that Abdalla, described in *The Standard* as "a young man full of revolutionary ideas," would uncritically accept the rules of Swahili prosody and yet defy the dictatorial and draconian rules of the State. It seems to me that this can partially be explained in terms of the influences of his childhood. Not only did poets who wrote in accordance with prosody influence Abdalla, but his own mentor Ahmad Basheikh Hussein was a diehard traditionalist poet who had much

sway on him and would have frowned at any attempt by his pupil to violate the rules of prosody he had imbibed at the feet of his mentor. But even more important, adhering to prosody and writing in the Mombasa dialect of Kimvita signifies Abdalla's attachment to a certain Swahili cultural nationalism and identity. Thus it can well be said that Abdalla, the poet who had fought gallantly for political freedom and was jailed for it, was opposed to the freedom of artistic experimentation. Yet, we would be unjust to stress the importance of this apparent contradiction, considering that Abdalla's preferences in the theory and practice of art need not be necessarily synonymous with his committed fight for political freedom in Kenya.

Clearly, Abdalla's assertion that "watalaamu wa ushairi wa Kiswahili kwa umoja wao wamekubaliana kuwa shairi la Kiswahili ni lazima liwe na vina na mizani" 'scholars of Swahili have unanimously agreed that the Swahili poem must have rhyme and meter' demonstrates how much of a premium poets like him attach to adherence to Swahili prosody, and smacks of artistic despotism. But this seeming protectionism emanates from construing Swahili poetry as a heritage handed down from generation to generation among the Swahili. It is therefore appropriate to situate Abdalla's poetry within the Swahili prosodic convention, which also entails the tradition of using poetry as a vehicle for protest and resistance, as Mulukozi amply illustrates in his essay "Protest and Resistance in Swahili Poetry 1660–1885" (1982).

As Abdalla's remarks above show, Swahili prosodists consider *mizani* (meter) and *vina* (rhyme) not only as the mainstay of Swahili verses, but mandatory as well. In their view, reckless deviation from this norm would render a poem *guni* (defective or deficient), resulting in the devaluation of the artistic composition (Abdulaziz 60). Sheikh Amri Abeid, William Hichens, Lyndon Harries, J. W. T. Allen, and Shariff attempted the explanation of these highly rigid and clearly defined prosodic conventions. However, as Mohamed H. Abdulaziz in *Muyaka: 19th Century Swahili Popular Poetry* (1979) and Gudrun Mieke and others in *Kala Shairi* (2002) show, the classifications are often problematic in many ways, not least among them the tendency to conflate *utendi* and *mashairi*, which are two distinct poetic genres with the former consisting of longer narrative or epic poems, while the latter consists of poems that are relatively short and may be lyrical. In his discussion of Muyaka's poems, Abdulaziz cogently cautions: "At the purely metric and rhyme level the *mashairi* forms give one an impression of a highly rigid framework that would be bound to give rise to artificial diction and the reducing of the whole poetic work to mere versification" (48). But Abdulaziz's rigorous analysis of Muyaka's verses reveals the poet's outstanding artistic astuteness within the confines of prosodic conventions, an astuteness that made Muyaka a model to look up to by his nineteenth-century contemporaries and future generations of Swahili poets, including Abdalla. If Muyaka's mastery of prosody enabled him to successfully merge form and content to produce verses of considerable appeal across generations, Abdalla too succeeds in debunking the myth of empty artificiality and insipid versification in his poetry.

Abdalla's poems in *Sauti ya Dhiki*, like Muyaka's, belong to the *mashairi* genre. In the volume, his shortest verses such as "Tua Moyo," "Tendekezo," and "Kokoiko" have only one stanza of four lines each while the longest poem, "Kutendana," has 147 strophes. The bulk of the poems are short, roughly under eight stanzas each. The Swahili quatrain *tarbia* is made up of four lines with two hemistiches each with

eight vocal syllables to the hemistiche, and a rhyme pattern *ab, ab, ab bx*. Therefore, the total number of measured syllables in each stanza is 64. As Abdulaziz aptly argues, Muyaka was instrumental in popularizing this syllabic measure and rhyme pattern (Abdulaziz 50). In Abdalla's volume, another pattern—*ab, ab, ab, bx*—also appears. One other important aspect of *mashairi* as a poetic genre is the last line in the first stanza, called *kituo*, which acts as a refrain and is often repeated in all the subsequent stanzas for emphasis and musical purposes. The centrality of the musicality is underscored by Allen's observation that "[a]ll Swahili verse form was and almost all is composed to be sung" (179). Abdalla's own brother Ahmed Nassir (Juma Bhalo) is an accomplished *taarab* music composer and singer, while Abdalla himself has recited or sung his poems in various places and times in accordance with the tradition of performance in Swahili poetry (Ohly 82).

It must be mentioned, however, that Abdalla does employ a wide range of styles within the *mashairi* genre. He uses eight main poetical patterns and another seventeen minor patterns (Ohly 83). Besides the predominant *tarbia* or quatrains, he also uses *tathlitha*, a verse with three lines in each stanza, as in "Nakumbuka" 'I Remember You,' "Mamba," 'The Crocodile,' and "Watiliye Pamba" 'Do Not Listen to Them.'

Abdalla also uses the *msuko* poetical form in which the last line is shortened and is not divided into two hemistiches with a caesura, as in "Kamliwaze" 'Comfort Her.' But since "Kamliwaze" indeed has five lines in every stanza, it may also be said to be a *takhmisa*, or a verse with five lines in each stanza. There are variations that can be seen in the measured syllables in the stanzas. For example, instead of 8 + 8 in each hemistich, we also encounter verses such as in "Yatakoma" 'Suffering Will End' with 6 + 6, "Watiliye Pamba" 'Do Not Listen to Them,' which has 8 + 5, and "Mamba" with 4 + 8 as the metric measure in each line.

Abdalla's use of dialogue verse forms also deserves mention in this overview of his poetry. There are at least three types of dialogue verses that he uses in his prison poetry: (1) the *fumbo*, or riddle; (2) dialogue between two characters; and (3) dialogue accompanied with authorial comment. The *fumbo* that typically anticipates audience participation is a dialogic characteristic of Swahili poetry that demonstrates Abdalla's keen awareness of a common and shared poetic tradition. In effect, the *fumbo* affirms Njogu's premise that Bakhtin's notion of dialogism should not be restricted to the novel, justifying what Njogu describes as the emergence of "a discomfort within dialogic criticism with the privileging of the novel genre" (1). A good example of *fumbo* is the poem "Mamba." That verse form presupposes that there is an audience that should provide the answer to the riddle; hence, Raymond Ohly's appropriate reference to it as "semi-dialogue" (85). In "Mnazi," two brothers argue over their father's inheritance of *mnazi* (the palm tree), while in "Kutendana" 'The Mutual Act,' there is a heated dialogue between a man exhibiting desire and a woman rejecting his sexual overtures, with the author interjecting intermittently as the third voice to adjudicate in the row that ensues.

It would seem that in writing poems that adhere strictly to traditional Swahili poetic prosody, Abdalla presumably undercuts his spirit of resistance and protest, and betrays a conform to an established artistic order. Yet, his choice of the Kimvita Swahili dialect rather than the so-called Standard Swahili underscores his spirit of resistance and protest. The East African Language Committee, which recommended and popularized the Kiunguja dialect of Zanzibar

as *Kiswahili Sanifu*, Standard Swahili, did not have African representation. The arbitrary touting of Kiunguja as the purest and most authentic Swahili dialect from more than twenty dialects has been a matter of contention since the colonial period in East Africa, with some arguing that it is indeed the Kimvita dialect that deserves pride of place, because the oldest Swahili poems were composed in it, particularly, the poems of eminent and vastly influential poet Muyaka bin Hajji. Whereas the contingency of place of birth is crucial in Abdalla's use of Kimvita, it bears noting that in using it so skillfully in what has come to be regarded as one of the most compelling Swahili poetry anthologies in contemporary times, Abdalla manages to launch a subtle assault on those privileging Kiunguja as the dialect of sublime artistic expression. The choice of Kimvita too speaks to the politics of identity, with Abdalla situating his identity within the social milieu in which he was born and bred in Mombasa, the cradle of Kimvita.

Since all the poems are dated chronologically, I concur with Ohly, who describes this anthology as a kind of "poetical diary" that registers Abdalla's varying moods, feelings, and thoughts while he languished behind prison walls, so much so that we can follow them "month by month" (Ohly 87). The poems trace in almost chronological fashion the wide range of thematic concerns that preoccupied the poet, therefore accentuating the multivocality of his prison poetry. Ohly's characterization of the collection as a form of "poetical diary" suggests its affinity with or proximity to what Smith and Watson term genres of "life writing" such as autobiography or memoir. Regarding autobiography, William Howarth succinctly remarks that it is an attempt by individuals to "carve a public monument out of their private lives" (92). The interplay between the private and the public sphere is quite pronounced in *Sauti ya Dhiki*, as this collection of poems constitutes Abdalla's imposing "public monument," at once attracting critical acclaim and raising condemnation within and without literary circles. Yet, what is foremost in the content and context of *Sauti ya Dhiki* is the spirit of defiance and resilience as an examination of the wide range of themes in the volume would reveal.

The political engagement that implicated and imbricated Abdalla in what the Kenya government viewed as seditious activities was not in the least extinguished by his prison experience. If anything his incarceration seems to have at once further embittered him against the state apparatuses, and invigorated his zeal to operate as both artist and political activist. Indeed, for Abdalla, art and activism appear more or less like Siamese twins, as the examination of his thematic concerns in *Sauti ya Dhiki* bears out. On the whole, *Sauti ya Dhiki* is Abdalla's response to the vicissitudes and injustices of imprisonment, a manifesto of his political ideology, and an indictment of Kenyatta's authoritarian rule and the apparent impunity with which the regime broke independence promises. His poetry is therefore necessarily tendentious. That Abdalla would muster the courage to mount such a trenchant critique of Kenyatta's government within prison walls at a time when writing against the government was tantamount to committing suicide is an astounding feat. One may speculate that perhaps by sustaining a stance antithetical toward the government while within prison walls, Abdalla was being true to his character and nature. And yet the various explicit and implicit ways within which Abdalla expresses his iconoclasm and militancy are an index of his multiple poetical voices.

Abdalla's anthology abounds with poems bearing overt political overtones. The very first poem in the collection *N'shishiyelo ni Lilo* (I Am Unshakeable) is a supreme example of Abdalla's uncompromising position and his politicizing of the "truth" as he riles against the ruling elite in Kenya:

Walineni walimwengu, wa zama zilopisiye
Kwamba kweli i tungu, kwa yule aambiwaye
Nami haya ndugu yangu, sasa niyaaminiye
Asojua nasikiye, apeleleze ajuwe

Kweli naifahamu, haipendwi aswilani
Kwa mja hiyo ni sumu, mbaya iso kifani
Mwenye kuitakalamu, hapendezi katwani
Sasa nshayaamini, ni kweli haya ni kweli

Kweli imenitongeya, kwa kuinena mwendani
Wale nilowaambiya, wamenitiya dhikini
Wameniona mbaya, kumshinda Firauni
Kweli, sasa naamini, si wangi waipendao

Kweli naliwaambiya, wakuu wa nti hini
Haeleza moya moya, kwa wanati wa ntini
Kuhusu walofanyiya, upande wa Upinzani
Sasa kuwamo tabuni, nalipwa kwa hiyo kweli

Kweli lilipowatoma, kama dasturi yake
Wao wakaona vyema, afadhali wanishike
Wanishike hima hima, hima ndani waniweke
Ngomeni n'adhibibike, nijute kusema kweli

Mno wanganiadhibu, adhabu kila namna
Na mangi yanganiswibu, ya usiku na mtana
Hayatakuwa sababu, ya kuniasa kunena
Kweli nitapoiyona, tanena siinyamai

Mateso yao yangawa, nda kuumiza mtima
Hayatakuwa ni dawa, ya kutonipa kusema
Ni bure wajisumbuwa, nilipo nnasimama
Si 'mi wa kurudi nyuma, kweli ilipo 'tasonga

Kweli naitiya tamma, nikuage ndugu yangu
Kweli si mwenye kukoma, kuwambiya walimwengu
Kweli si'yati kunena, katika uhai wangu
Nami kwa upande wangu, hi'yambiwa 'takubali

So said the people of the world, of times past
That truth is bitter, for the one being told
As for me, my comrades, I have come to believe so
May the one who does not know, seek to know

Truth is not at all palatable, this indeed I know
For man it is poisonous, dangerous beyond compare

Whoever says the truth, does not become popular at all
Now I believe this, it indeed is so

Truth has imperiled me, for speaking it my friend
Those to whom I spoke, subject me to anguish
They view me as evil, more evil than Pharaoh
Now I know the truth, is not loved by many

I spoke the truth, to the leaders of this country
I recounted one by one, to the citizens of this country
How they had been deprived, in their opposition ranks
Now being in trouble, is the price I am made to pay

When truth seared them, as it was wont to do
To arrest me, they deemed it fit
To arrest me speedily, to incarcerate me speedily
To make me suffer in the fort, so I may regret speaking the truth

However much they punish me, punishing me in whichever way
Whatever hardship I undergo, in daytime and nighttime
I will not be dissuaded, I cling to my utterances
Whenever I see the truth, I will speak [it], I will not keep mum

Even if their torture, is heart-wrenching
It would not be the antidote, for stopping me from speaking
They are wasting their time, [as] I am immovable
I am not the sort that retreats, where the truth is that is where I go

Let me stop here on matters of truth, to bid you farewell brother
I will not stop telling the truth, to let the world know
I will not abandon the truth, in all my life
And I will accept the truth, when someone else tells me

(1-4)

The poem opens with reference to the ancient sages, who stated “*kweli i tungu*” ‘truth is bitter.’ Invoking the wisdom of *wahenga*, or ancient sages, is not uncommon among the Swahili and most other African communities. This invocation is in effect a reference to a shared and common text from the collective linguistic and literary fund that is recognizable to a wide spectrum of East African Swahili speakers. Bakhtin’s assertion that “the word in language is half someone else’s” is proven here as Abdalla attributes the axiomatic statement to “the people of times past” and puts the borrowed words to his own use (Bakhtin 504). Quite appropriately Abdalla uses an archaic expression “*wa zama zilopisiye*” ‘of times past’ rather, than a more contemporary expression as “*zama zilizopita*,” to at once ensure there is harmony in the meter and rhyme, with, for instance, the last word in each line in the stanza ending with the syllable *ye*, and also to emphasize the antiquity of the sages and hence the depth of their wisdom and the veracity of their views. Abdalla makes a shrewd choice of words to reinforce his argument on the necessity and the hazards of speaking the truth.

These images (notwithstanding that they may be somewhat trite) target the sense of taste, compelling the reader to imagine or experience mentally the taste

of bitterness and to envision the danger of truth as something with ominous fatal potentialities, namely, poison, in the purview of those in power. In the sixth stanza, the poet appeals to our sense of touch when he says “Kweli lilipowatoma, kama dasturi yake” ‘When the truth seared them, as it was wont to do,’ imbuing truth with the burning or searing ability like fire. In appealing to our sense of taste and touch, the poet reifies and concretizes an abstract a term as truth.

In this poem, Abdalla comes across as an inexorable purveyor and defender of the truth. As the voice of truth, the poet knows he must remain steadfast and unflinching in the wake of state repression. The final stanza is very emphatic on this, using the repetition of “kweli” ‘truth’ in every line to drive the point home. He is cognizant of the fact that the “truth is not at all palatable,” and yet he is firm in his determination to speak it. The poem is quite explicit in pointing to those he told the truth; namely the Kenyan political leadership, and the Kenyan population. It is tempting and perhaps rightly so, to ask, as Pontius Pilate asked Jesus Christ, according to the Gospels: what is the truth? A closer examination of the text and context suggests that the political message in *Kenya Twendapi?* is the “truth” at issue here. The government found the message unpalatable and deemed it necessary to lock its putative source and carrier behind bars. In stating “Wame-niona mbaya, kumshinda Firauni” ‘They [the government] view me as evil, more evil than Pharaoh,’ the poet alludes to the infamous and obstinate Pharaoh who in Biblical and Qu’ranic tradition is cast in negative light and is regarded—like Satan, the Devil—as the very epitome of vice and darkness. Pharaoh, like Satan, is said to have opposed the outworking of God’s purposes by obstinately refusing to release the Israelites from bondage. The line therefore suggests what we may call “pharaohization of opposition” to governmental authority. In stating that the government regarded him worse than Pharaoh, Abdalla stresses the intensity of government antipathy towards opposition and dissent. In other words, the line underscores the government’s predilection toward pharaohization, criminalization, or demonization of his political activism. But as he clearly shows in this first poem, he is far from being muted in his vocation as the voice of truth, which pines for the pathway to social justice and the expansion of democratic space in Kenya.

Hence, Abdalla’s activism and fight for social justice could not be muted by his prison experience, and if stopping his questioning and defiant mind was the government’s rehabilitation plan for him, it had failed terribly, as his prison poetry demonstrates. With respect to the government’s failure to at least muffle or at best mute his resistance, the poem succinctly puts it in the line “Ni bure wajisumbua, nilipo nnasimama” ‘They are wasting their time, [as] I am Immovable.’ “N’shishiyelo ni Lilo” is therefore a poem that serves as a preamble to Abdalla’s uncompromising political stance and protest against the Kenyatta regime. The same theme of defiance is articulated in the poem “Siwati” ‘Never Shall I Abandon It,’ in which the poet says:

Siwati n’shishiyelo, siwati kwani niwate?
Siwati ni lilo hilo, ‘talishika kwa vyovyote
Siwati ni mimi nalo, hapano au popote
Hadi kaburini sote, mimi nalo tufukiwe

Never shall I abandon, whatever I have clung to, why should I abandon it?
Never shall abandon it, I will stick to it whatever happens

Never shall abandon it, neither here nor anywhere else
 Until we are both in the grave

In stressing his determination, the poet uses the repetition of "Siwati" in every line in the entire poem. The rhetorical question "kwani niwate?" 'Why should I leave it?' presumes that the option of abandoning his activism is at best untenable and at worst unthinkable. So committed to the political struggle is the poet that he is willing to die for it, as the line "Hadi kaburini sote, mimi nalo tufukiwe" 'Until we are both in the grave' (where "it" is a pronoun referring to the poet's political activism). This poem is in harmony with Abdalla's impassioned message of willingness to sacrifice even one's own life in the pamphlet *Kenya Twendapi?* And as the last stanza in "Siwati" seems to suggest, he believes God would always be on his side in the just cause:

Siwati nimeradhiwa, kufikwa na kila mawi
 Siwati ningaambiwa, niaminiyo hayawi
 Siwati kisha nikawa kama nzi; hivyo siwi
 Thamma nakiri siwi, na Mn'ngu nisaidiya

Never shall I abandon it, I would rather face every sort of evil
 Never shall abandon it, even when they tell me I believe in the unattainable
 Never shall abandon it, and become like a fly, that way I cannot be
 That indeed I cannot be, and God help me

The appeal to God for help in his political struggle is another continuation of the trope of the marriage of politics and piety in Abdalla's art and activism, never mind that Mn'ngu is clearly a typographical error of the contracted form of "Mungu" 'God,' namely, "M'ngu." It should be noted in parentheses that the deletion of certain vowel sounds is not uncommon in spoken Kimvita and in many of his verses Abdalla captures the essence of the spoken word. Other poems in which the explicitness of Abdalla's message is unmistakable include "Yatakoma," "Siwati," "Kuno Kunena," and "Mamaetu Afrika."

Yet, there are also poems in which the poet masks his message in metaphor, thus requiring the readers to delve behind the surface to decipher the underlying meaning(s) and implications. Abdalla's famous poem "Mamba," is a classic example of the use of metaphor as a stratagem for critiquing a regime he found wanting, immoral and rotten:

Nami nambe, niwe kama waambao
 Niupambe, upendeze wasomao
 Niufumbe, wafumbuwe wawezao

Kuna mamba, mtoni metakabari
 Ajigamba, na kujiona hodari
 Yuwaamba, kwamba 'taishi dahari

Memughuri, ghururi za kipumbavu
 Afikiri, hataishiwa na nguvu
 Takaburi, hakika ni maangavu

Akumbuke, siku yake itafika
 Roho yake, ajuwe itamtoka
 Nguvu zake, kikomeche zitafika

Afahamu, mtu hajui la kesho
 Hatadumu, angatumia vitisho
 Maadamu, lenye mwanzo lina mwisho.

Let me also speak, so I can be like those who speak
 Let me adorn the poem, and make it appealing to the readers
 Let me compose a riddle, that those who can may untangle [it]

In the river there is a crocodile, highly conceited
 He brags, and regards himself as invincible
 He claims, he will live forever

He is a braggart, thumping his chest foolishly
 He imagines, his might will not dissipate
 For indeed pride, is before a fall

He should remember, when his day comes
 He should know, his spirit will leave him
 His might, will reach its end

Let him know, no one knows about tomorrow
 He will not last forever, even if he uses threats
 As what has a beginning, must also have an end (9)

In this poem written in the *tathlitha* genre (three lines in each stanza), Abdalla presents the riddle of a rapacious and supercilious reptile, the crocodile, deluding itself with the possession of an illusory and elusive immortality. He openly challenges the readers to unravel the riddle. The oral performance involving an artist presenting riddles (especially those with comparisons with animals) to audiences and challenging them to unravel them is not uncommon in the African oral tradition. It is instructive that in declaring his intention in the beginning of this poem, Abdalla uses the contraction of “niambe,” namely, “namebe,” literally meaning “I speak,” rather than “niandike” ‘I write,’ reflecting consciously or unconsciously the orality with which riddles are associated. The relative brevity of the poem harmonizes with the nature of the genre of *mafumbo* in the Swahili oral tradition, just long enough to provide clues for the audience to respond to the conundrum. The power of riddles lies in their indirectness and the figurativeness. The power and beauty of metaphor is a distinguishing feature of riddles. Yet the unraveling of the tenor represented by the vehicle “mamba,” or crocodile, in this poem would hardly have been pleasing to the ruling regime in Kenya. Therefore, the poet’s use of metaphor is a stratagem by which he assails Kenyatta’s arrogant leadership and false sense of security. The point of the poem is that no matter how powerful Kenyatta may be and no matter how long he holds the reigns of power, there is bound to be an end to his rule and his life. Abdalla reminds Kenyatta that as a mortal his time to expire must surely come, sooner or later. Abdalla yet again turns to the authority of the ancient sages and invokes a famous Swahili proverb:

“Hakuna lenye mwanzo lisilokuwa na mwisho” “There is nothing with a beginning that has no end.’ However, apparently due to the dictates of meter and rhyme, the poet paraphrases the proverb and renders it as “lenye mwanzo lina mwisho” ‘what has a beginning, must also have an end.’ Although the syntactic structure of the proverb is altered in the poem, the substance remains the same i.e., it aptly carries the Swahili and Islamic worldview on transience or impermanence as quintessential attributes of human life on earth. The metric pattern in the poem is 4 + 8 with the second hemistich seeming to at once complement and respond to the first one in each line, evoking the enactment of a real exchange between the artist who presents a riddle and the audience that attempts to find the solution.

When we relate the form to the content, it seems to me, that the four-syllable first hemistich is contrasted with the eight-syllable second hemistich, with the first one showing the reality of the shortness of human life, whereas the long one shows the appearance of longevity or eternity. Further, the overall brevity of the poem, apart from situating it within the tradition of performance of riddles as discussed above, also accentuates the brevity of human life and the inevitability of death. In other words, Abdalla attempts to imagine the demise of Kenyatta and the end of tyranny in Kenya. Thus the crocodile of Abdalla’s poem is synonymous with what Achille Mbembe calls the “postcolonial potentate” or “postcolonial autocrat,” who is blinded by a rather warped attitude toward mortality and his own subjectivity. As Mbembe argues apropos the autocrat, his ostensibly absolute subjectivity is hallucinatory, fake, and empty. Its *facticity* lies in caricature only: “The absolute does not exist in reality” (Mbembe 165). Given the autocrat’s imagined and imaginary immortality and invincibility, it takes considerable courage for an imprisoned poet to even think about the autocrat’s death; it is tantamount to thinking the unthinkable or imagining the unimaginable. As a matter of fact, to have the audacity to imagine the crocodile’s end or the President’s death as Abdalla does in this prison poem was considered treasonable at the time of its writing. It goes without saying that imagining the potentate’s demise is made possible by what words at the disposal of a consummate wordsmith can do in spite of or because of the actuality of incarceration.

This bold poem at once aptly represents Abdalla’s angst and anger and anticipates Kenyatta’s death, an eventuality that came to pass on 22 August 1978, eight years after the poem was written. It also recalls the rise and fall of the Pate dynasty on the Kenyan coast as captured by Sayyid Abdallah Ali bin Nasir in his classical *utendi* (long narrative poem) titled *Inkishafi* (Revelation) in which the ruling elite are depicted as having lolled in luxury and pomp but ultimately expired and were interred and forgotten. However, if Abdalla hoped, as the poem shows, that despotism would end with Kenyatta’s death, his hope was misplaced. “Mamba” is therefore the apogee of Abdalla’s iconoclastic outlook on Kenyatta’s rule. Following Mbembe’s characterization of the representation of the autocrat in popular culture, it is appropriate to conclude that Abdalla wrests “from the state the power to represent itself and to publicly exhibit the autocrat” (Mbembe 160). In the Kenyan case, Kenyatta was the autocrat. Abdalla makes words to “publicly exhibit the autocrat” as a beastly mortal capable of dying like the victims of his tyranny. The poet therefore demonstrates that he did not have the fear and inhibition that plagued even the bravest of critics at that time.

To be sure, the reading of *mamba* as simultaneously symbolizing specifically Kenyatta and epitomizing the gamut of Mbembe’s postcolonial potentates in

general, is cogent. In this instance, the particular and the general are two sides of the interpretative coin. What is curious, though, is how earlier critics found it necessary to elide the particular and dwell solely on the general in their interpretation of poems such as this. For example, Kenyan critic Chacha Nyaigoti Chacha deemed it plausible to interpret *mamba* the “crocodile” as a representation of complacent African leaders and dictators in general (74). Tanzanian critic F. E. M. K. Senkoro similarly stated, almost evasively, that the “crocodile” is emblematic of the exploitative classes in capitalist societies (126). The Polish literary scholar Ohly, then working at the Institute of Swahili Research at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, made the terse statement that “‘mamba’ is a derogatory symbol,” but he offers no further elucidation (89). Another Tanzanian critic, Euphrase Kezilahabi, simply stated “Shairi liitwalo mambo sitalifafanua hapa, lakini nafikiri msomaji mwenye busara ataweza kubaini ‘mamba’ ni nani” ‘I will not explicate the poem entitled “crocodile” here, although I think any shrewd reader should be able to discern who the crocodile is in the poem’ (5). Kezilahabi did not explain why he fails to explain the poet’s figurative reptile, but in the same breath remarks that its meaning is obvious to the “shrewd reader.” Kezilahabi takes no pain to explain what he means by “shrewd readers.” Granted Abdalla may have had the “shrewd readers” in mind when he stated in the first stanza “Niufumbe, wafumbue wawezao” ‘Let me compose a riddle, that those who can may untangle [it].’ But in the second line of the first stanza, the poet also mentions: “niupambe, upendeze wasomao” ‘Let me adorn it, and make it appealing to the readers’—not shrewd readers alone. Looking at it superficially, it may seem as though Kezilahabi had simply no patience for inept readers. But I contend that Kezilahabi’s reticence was, in effect, driven by other considerations, considerations that typified critical responses to Abdalla’s poetry especially in the 1970s and 1980s.

In no way am I attempting to point out blind alleys in these initial exegeses of Abdalla’s poem, nor am I accusing these critics of mendacity. Their reading of the poem quite correctly resonates with Mbembe’s characterization of Africa’s postcolonial autocrats who may range from Idi Amin Dada of Uganda to Dr. Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, from Jean-Bédél Bokassa of the Central Africa Republic to Yakubu Gowon of Nigeria, all of whom were contemporaneous with the writing of the poem. Further, the poem may have been conceived of as a mark of the poet’s prescience as it anticipated then future despots, such as Daniel arap Moi and Mwai Kibaki of Kenya, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda. In any event, Abdalla’s other poem, “Mamaetu Afrika” ‘Our Mother Africa,’ as Senkoro rightly observes, offers compelling evidence of the poet’s concern with the destiny of the whole continent of Africa in view of its tumultuous history from slavery to the colonial encounter to realities of neocolonialism and postcolonial disenchantment. My point, though, is that for the critics then it became expedient and “politically correct” to remain within the realm of such generalizations, presumptions, and assumptions, even if the text and context pointed to Kenyatta as the poet’s principal “crocodile” with a phony sense of immortality. This politically correct interpretation was not wrong by any standards of literary interpretation. What is remarkable is how it almost became the *only* way of interpreting the poem. We can safely speculate that it was fear that led to this cautious reading of Abdalla’s poetry.

Four things may be deduced from this scenario: (1) it was within the province of the critics to avoid direct mention of Kenyatta in their analyses as such mention was not necessary to validate their critical claims; (2) Abdalla as an artist was operating within his province of “poetic license” and perhaps even “poetic justice” in utilizing metaphor as a stratagem; (3) the recourse to self-censorship by the critics, even those from neighboring Tanzania, implies that they may have been cognizant of the pervasive climate of suppression and repression of dissent and dissidence in the East African region and territorial boundaries were no guarantee of safety from reprisal; (4) lastly, not *all* intellectuals wanted to needlessly ruffle the feathers of the ruling elite. On the contrary, a considerable number of intellectuals were cowed into taking the line of least resistance, playing safe rather than sharing the fate of those on the long list of prisoners of conscience. Chacha remarks that Abdalla uses figures of speech to “obscure meaning from his tormentors in order to avoid being annihilated”(127). But in a sense, Chacha, Senkoro, Kezilahabi, and other critics were motivated by the same fear of “annihilation,” to adopt reticence when it came to unmasking the implied specificity of reference to Kenyatta in Abdalla’s figures of speech. In critiquing the critics for their failure to fully elucidate and enlighten, we must take into account these extenuating circumstances.

The fact that the voices of dissidence suffuse Abdalla’s collection of poems does not preclude the presence of other voices with which the poet speaks. Doubt and didacticism, for example, seem to be strange bedfellows, but in Abdalla’s poetry they go hand in hand. This synthesis of points of view that seem antithetical to each other is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s proposition that individuals do not have one single point of view, but they inhabit multiple worldviews through the various social discourses they speak. Abdalla’s marriage of art and activism lends itself to arousing the readers to action. It is therefore in harmony with this rabble-rousing stance that we encounter poems calling on the masses to awake from their slumber and to act against tyranny, such as in “Wasafiri Tuamkeni” ‘Travelers, Let Us Arise,’ “Zindukani” ‘Wake Up!’ “Jana na Leo na Kesho” ‘Yesterday and Today and Tomorrow,’ “Semani wenye Kusema” ‘Speak, Those Who Can Speak,’ and “Kokoiko!” whose onomatopoeic filiation to the crowing of a rooster renders it almost untranslatable.

Chacha describes Abdalla’s *Sauti ya Dhiki* as a collection of poems aimed at “kufundisha umma wa ulimwengu wa tatu” ‘teaching the third world public’ (65). Yet a closer examination of the poems betrays the poet’s intermittent feelings of inadequacy, such as in “Telezi” ‘Slipperiness’ “Wasiwasi Enda Zako” ‘Dread, Go Away,’ “Moyo Iwa na Subira” ‘Oh! Heart, Be Patient,’ and “Njia Panda” ‘At a Crossroads’ (Chacha 65).

Abdalla is averse to metaphorical slumber, which can be interpreted to mean acquiescence and quiet acceptance of totalitarianism. In a number of verses he calls on the public to awake from this state of acquiescence and confront their own destiny. In typical didactic fashion he says in “Kokoiko!”:

Kokoiko! Kokoiko! Awika jimbi awika
 Vitandani muliyoko, namuanze kurauka
 Asoitika mwito, atachelewa kufika
 Yule aliyekutwika, ndiye atayekutuwa

Kokoiko! Kokoiko! The rooster is crowing
 Those of you sleeping, start getting up quick
 The one not heeding the cockerel, will be late
 The one who put the load upon you, is the one who will unload it from you (64)

“Kokoiko! Kokoiko!” is, as indicated earlier, onomatopoeic imitation of the crowing of a rooster. Perhaps it is Abdalla’s infusion of such dramatic effects in his poetry that impelled Ohly to comment that “Abdilatif is attracted by the theatre” (Ohly 88). Needless to say, in this poem we hear the voice of a rooster, a nonhuman entity acting out in the human drama. Reading polyphony in the imitation of crowing in the poem should not be perceived as ascribing undue significance to a tangential detail of the poem. But it should be borne in mind that the crowing of the rooster signifies that the time has come to wake up and to act: “Vitandani muliyoko, namuanze kuamka” ‘Those of you sleeping, start getting up quick time for action.’ It is therefore quite apparent that the philosophy actuating Abdalla’s poetry privileges the dynamism of political activism rather than the stasis of acquiescence.

Despite Abdalla’s outright militancy and iconoclastic writing, as a prisoner of conscience he could not help but engage in soul-searching. Chacha alludes to this internal conflict when he discusses what he calls the poet’s “mjadala na nafsi” ‘dialogue with his soul’ (66). *Sauti ya Dhiki* is not, then, merely a testament to the poet’s venting of his anger at the jaded political landscape, economic disparity, and bad governance; it accords him an opportunity to look at himself, and to do so critically. Whereas there is no doubt about Abdalla’s commitment to political engagement and the struggle for change in Kenya, there are poems in the anthology that show moments of self-interrogation and self-doubt. For instance in the poem “Telezi” ‘Slipperiness,’ the poet interrogates not his role in the struggle, but his approach:

Japo hivyo zilikuwa, ndiya hazipitiki
 Bali mimi haamuwa, kwenenda japo kwa dhiki
 Kumbe vile nitakuwa, mfano wa samaki
 Ni mfano wa samaki, kuiendeya ndowana

Zikanibwaga telezi, sikujuwa kuzendeya
 Ningekwenda kwa henezi, yasingenifika haya
 Lakini tena siwezi, mwenendo huu kutumiya
 Sitawata kutembea, ila tabadili mwendo

Though that is how the paths were, there were impassable
 Yet I decided to proceed, despite the hardships
 Little did I know, I will be like a fish
 Like a fish, taking itself into the hook

I fell on slippery ground, I did not know how to walk on it
 I should have been more cautious, to avoid whatever befell me
 But I will not ever again, walk in that fashion
 Though I will not stop walking, I will change my approach (23)

In the poem, Abdalla likens himself to “samaki” ‘a fish’ that foolishly lets itself into the hook, oblivious of the danger the hook poses to its survival. This is a

self-deprecating image that exhibits the poet's awareness of his folly, but awareness that only surfaces after the harm is already done. So in this poem we witness the voice of regret and self-blame, underscoring the multiple voices with which Abdalla presents his poems. In this instance it has dawned on the poet that his approach was somewhat imprudent and flawed. Abdalla arrives at the moment of what Ioan Davies describes as the "reformulation of [revolutionary] ideas in such a way that they [would have] profound implications for the direction of the political movement" (54).

The spirit of this poem contrasts with the poet's apparent cocksureness in "Nshisheyelo ni Lilo" 'I Am Unshakeable' and "Siwati" 'Never Shall I Abandon It' in which he leaves no iota of doubt as to his capacity and capability to remain steadfast in the struggle. In "Telezi" 'Slipperiness,' Abdalla queries his own conduct in the struggle and evidently wonders whether it was judicious to have confronted the regime with the tactics he had chosen, such as writing, and distributing *Kenya Twendapi?* along with a threat to use "alternative means" of removing the despot in power. This admission of his tactical shortcomings and imprudence presumably comes as a result of the reflection that incarceration makes possible. In this case, Abdalla views his tactics as those of a neophyte unschooled in the intricacies and complexities of the murky and slippery terrain of the struggle. The fall implied in the poem is his arrest and subsequent conviction.

In his 1979 interview with Chacha, Abdalla discloses that his arrest was a result of being betrayed by someone he trusted (Chacha 6). Embedded in this poem, therefore, is also a heavy sense of regret for trusting the wrong person and trusting too much. He had learned his lesson as the poem shows, so that he expresses his intent to change the "approach," rather than completely abandon the journey. It is important, then, to examine further the preponderant metaphor of the journey in Abdalla's poetry, a metaphor exemplified particularly in the poems "Ndiya Panda" 'At a Crossroads' and "Wasafiri Tuamkeni" 'Let Us Arise, Travelers.' Needless to say, the metaphor emanates from the recurrent journey motif or leitmotif in both religious and secular literature. For example, the Qu'ran refers to journeys made by Prophets Mohamed, Abraham, and Moses. Regarding the journey metaphor and the Bible, Floyd V. Filson observes that "the journey narrative is one of the dominant literary patterns of the Biblical story" spanning from the nomadic wanderings of the patriarchs from Ur to Haran to the missionaries journeys of the apostles (68). In both the secular and spiritual spheres, many are the times when life itself is perceived as a journey. But it is probably the journey or pathway to just a world—as Mari J. Matsuda would put it—that should be given primacy in an explication of these poems since this is Abdalla's principle preoccupation in his art and activism (Matsuda 8).

In utilizing the journey as a metaphor, Abdalla's poetry lends itself to intertextuality and thus speaks to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. In other words, as Bakhtin postulates with regard to the novel, there is in Abdalla's poetry the tendency for borrowing utterances from others and infusing whatever is borrowed with his own idiosyncrasies. Further, the echoes of Abdalla's own poems can be discerned in the subsequent poems of other poets. In line with Njogu, I reiterate yet again that dialogism and heteroglossia (linguistic variability) are not limited to the genre of the novel merely on the basis of what Dorothy Hale describes as the novel's "generic promiscuity" in her explication of Bakhtin's social and linguistic

theory (Hale 449). It may well be that dialogism itself exhibits a certain level of “promiscuity” that makes it applicable beyond the novel.

In another poem “Ndia Panda,” Abdalla expresses his dilemma of choice and indecision as he faces the challenge of which way to go in the journey. He strikes the pose of a lost traveler:

Safari naloiyanza, bado ningalimo kwenda
Sitawata kujikaza, isipate kunishinda
Nataka kuimaliza, ndivyo nependavyo tenda
Sasa niko njia panda

Ilipofika safari, silijuwi la kutenda
Nimekwisha kufikiri, lakini limenishinda
Nawatakanyi shauri, nijuwe ndia ya kwenda
Mojawapo ya ndiya panda

I am still on the journey, the journey I began
I will not relax, so as not to be vanquished
I want to stay the course, that is what I want to do
Now I am at a crossroads

When the journey began, I had no idea what to do
I have pondered about it, but I find no answers
I implore you for guidance, so I can know where to go
Which one of the crossroads (79–80)

This poem is an index of the limits of confidence and sure-footedness. In the line “Nimekwisha kufikiri, lakini limenishinda” ‘I have thought about it, but I find no answers,’ the poet concedes that as a traveler he is unable to successfully navigate the place and space that the journey demands of him. Determined to stay the course, Abdalla seeks for the readers’ help to navigate his way in the labyrinthine journey with the words “Nawatakanyi shauri, nijuwe ndia ya kwenda” ‘I implore YOU [in plural] for guidance, so I can know where to go.’ The title “Njia Panda” ‘At at Crossroads’ is a fitting image of a tortured and divided self. This voice of indecisiveness and self-doubt is another of the multiplicity of voices that emerge in *Sauti ya Dhiki*.

As this study has shown, the conditions of incarceration under which the poems in *Sauti ya Dhiki* were written did little to dampen either Abdalla’s creative flow or his spirit of resistance and protest. Abdalla distinguished himself from poets who chose to compose the plaudits that massaged the ego of the postcolonial potentate in Kenya. Boukheti Amana of *Malenga wa Vumba* fame who wrote the poem “Wasifu wa Baba Kenyatta” ‘The Life of Our Father Kenyatta’ is a case in point. Abdalla was never one to stoop that low. Had he lost too much faith in his country to write works in praise of its leadership? It is apparent that Abdalla’s activism and artistic inclinations would never have endeared him to the ruling elite in Kenya. When he completed his prison term in 1972, he wrote “N’sharudi” ‘I Am Back,’ in which he essentially announces his return to the normal routine in the fight for social change. In the poem he disavows harboring bitterness or

resentments against his detractors, betrayers, and tormentors. But he soon found out that he was never safe in Kenya, as long as he held tenaciously to his ideological position. He fled to Tanzania, where he worked at the Institute of Swahili Research as a research fellow, before going to Britain where he worked at the Swahili Service of BBC Radio. Now teaching Swahili at Leipzig University in Germany, Abdalla has yet to end his exile.

Writing under incarceration and surveillance against a system that imprisoned him for his writing *Sauti ya Dhiki* in the first place, Abdalla's is thus one of the bravest and most vocal voices of protest against despotism to come from Kenyan prisons. As this analysis of *Sauti ya Dhiki* demonstrates, Abdalla marries art and activism, lending his poetry a political engagement that is laced with multifarious voices ranging from the lament of a prisoner to a critique of his coastal people, anxiety over his family, and affirmation of the commitment to the struggle; as the confidence-exuding sage and all-knowing counselor, and the unsure and befuddled neophyte in search of counsel and direction. It is clearly evident he is one of the writers whom Davis describes as "dedicated to transforming a system which they believe is corrupt and immoral and to speaking the truth as they see it" (Davis 31). Already a poet prior to his incarceration, Abdilatif Abdalla captures his affective responses to the ontological and existential reality of the debilitating conditions without losing sight of the writing in prison as a daring act of recalcitrant defiance—or put differently, a bold reaction to the imprisoning action of the postcolonial potentate. In reading his prison poetry, we embark on an exploration or mapping of his psychic journey as we "listen" to his articulation of a wide spectrum of voices whose fulcrum is the denunciation of the postcolonial autocrat. Emerging from prison as a site for writing, *Sauti ya Dhiki* remains a landmark contribution to the canon of modern Swahili poetry.

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