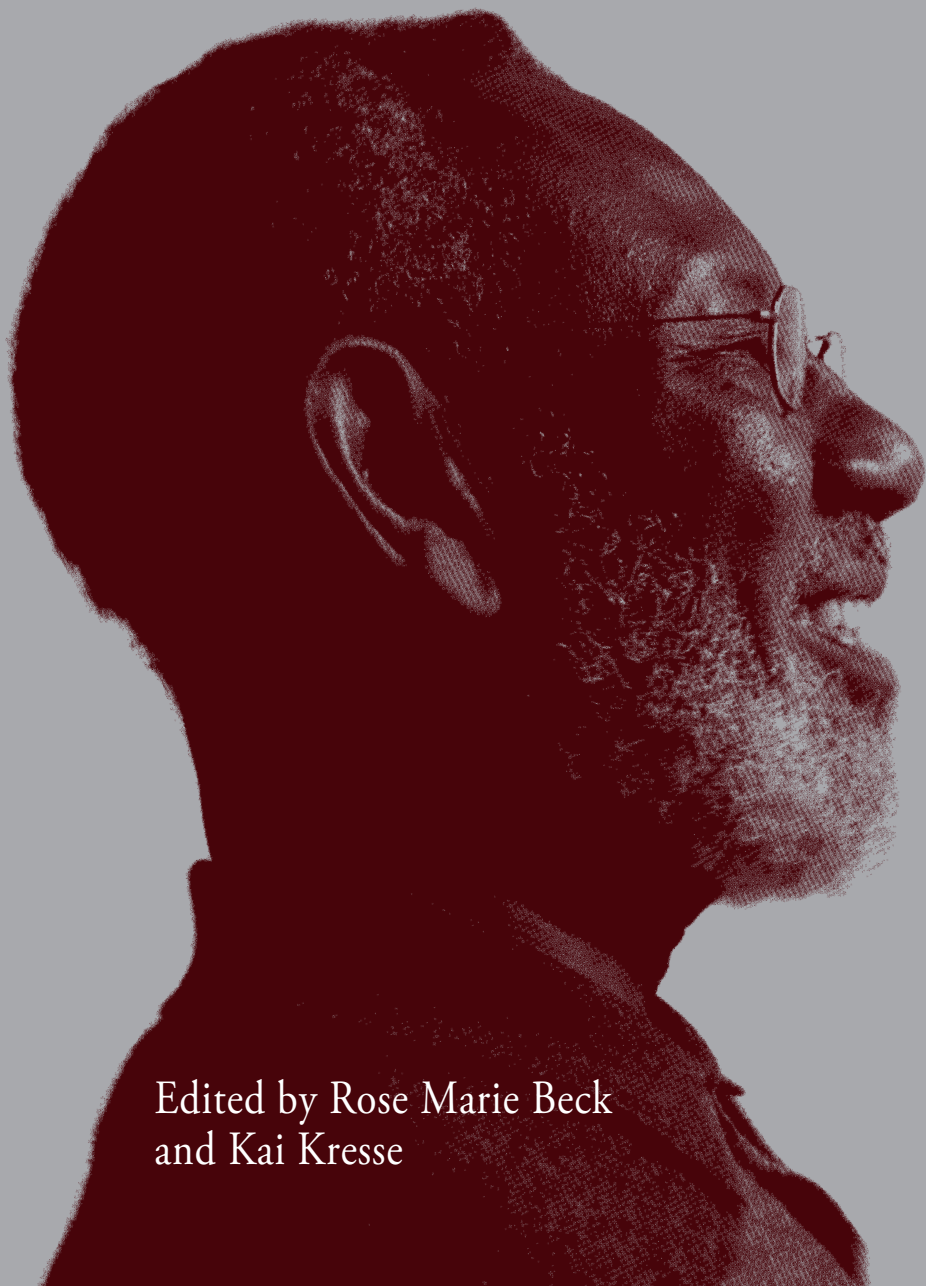


ABDILATIF POET IN ABDALLA POLITICS



Edited by Rose Marie Beck
and Kai Kresse

Abdilatif Abdalla: Poet in Politics

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Rose Marie Beck & Kai Kresse



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Ken Walibora Waliaula

Doing Things with Words in Prison Poetry²⁵

[B]ut can words alone bring down a tyrant?

Kunle Ajibade, *Jailed for Life*

In March 1969 Kenyan Swahili poet and political activist Abdilatif Abdalla appeared before a Mombasa court on sedition charges. The magistrate found him guilty and sentenced him to eighteen months in prison for the offence. But the attorney general Charles Njonjo successfully appealed against the sentence, claiming the magistrate had been too lenient. Abdalla's sentence was accordingly doubled to three years. The sedition case thrust Abdalla, then aged 22, from relative obscurity to the national limelight in post-independence Kenya. Writing subsequently in the preface to his anthology of prison

poems, *Sauti ya Dhiki/ "Voice of Agony"* (1973), Abdalla would state with unequivocal candour, that he was imprisoned because of being found guilty of writing and distributing in a number of towns on the Kenyan coast, a pamphlet entitled *Kenya: Twendapi? "Kenya: Where are we Headed?"* (1968). Abdalla's anti-government activities had not gone unnoticed, and he was, therefore, compelled to feel the full force of the Jomo Kenyatta regime for rubbing it the wrong way.

Sauti ya Dhiki encapsulates the many and varied moods and affective states that engulfed the poet 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 "travelled" under the conditions of deprivation and dehumanization that this figurative prison journey occasioned. As Soyinka stated regarding his own prison poetry, "the poems are a map of the course trodden by the human mind during the years of incarceration" (quoted in Afejuku 2001: 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, prison poetry contains a whole range of mental or psychic courses or journeys. The prisoner as poet is also impelled to speak in many tongues, to paraphrase Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson (2001: 134), whose conception of self as well as Bakhtin's idea of speech variability in "Discourse in the Novel" (2006) inform this analysis.

The Multiple "I"-s and Speaking in Tongues

Following J.L. Austin's concept of "doing things with words," (Urmson & Sbisà 1975) I examine the various voices and guises that the poet adapts and adopts to do things that help remake his world unmade by the prison experience. I argue that the poet's "I" appears in many guises and is heard in multiple voices so as to problematize the notion of a stable, unitary self.

²⁵ This paper was first presented at Africa at Noon Lecture at African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin-Madison, September 22, 2010.

As Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson have remarked, the very notion of a stable unitary self has increasingly come under attack in recent autobiographical criticism. Smith and Watson see as misreading initial interpretations of the “I” which hinged on the assumption that the concept of individuality was sufficient as a determining force in life writing (2001: 129). They call for a more nuanced reading of the “I” in life narratives, a reading that goes above and beyond the facile fascination with an “I” exclusively bound to an autonomous and concrete individuality.

The idea of a fragmented self or subject has lately become commonplace, and so is the complicated and often conflicted interplay between subject and object. One could perhaps claim that as early as the early 19th century W.E.B. Dubois (1994: 2-3) was well aware of the instability of the “I” when he conceived of the “double-consciousness” of the African American experience. Smith & Watson posit the existence of at least four types of the “I”: the historical, the narrating, the narrated, and the ideological. Thus in their purview, the traditional approach to studying the “I”- then - and the “I”- now - is also inadequate in making sense of the manifold manifestations of the pronoun (2001: 129).

As Smith & Watson further state, the historical or real “I” is a person located in a particular time and place, whose story the autobiographical act enacts or narrates but whose life is far more complex and transcendent than the story can possibly fully contain or fully embrace. One could think of the autobiographical mode as offering only a slice of that life while other slices exist elsewhere (e.g. in the archives of the police, hospital, schools, churches, family album, or in the malleable memory of others). Nevertheless, this “I” that lives in the real world, they posit, is unknown and unknowable. In other words the “I” representing the real historical Abdalla is much more complex than the one presenting the carceral imagination and experience of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The real Abdalla is scattered in the public and private archives of his native Kenya and the countries of his exile (e.g. the schools, airline manifests, payrolls, mosque registers, family albums, prison and court records, conference panels) and cannot be fully represented by the “I”-s or personas of his poetry. One could argue that even the media’s characterization of Abdalla as a “revolutionary young man” in 1969 is but a symptom and a consequence of a shifting interpretive impulse, which does not adequately capture the quintessence of Abdalla’s authentic historicity. Are we, then, left with no viable option but to cling to the “agnostic” belief that despite or because of his poetry Abdalla’s real “I” is both unknown and unknowable?

It would seem that what readers encounter is the narrating “I,” the one telling the story whose range of vision is limited and remains within the confines of the story and lacks the broader experiential history of the historical “I”. Yet this narrating “I,” though knowable and known, is equally complex. Smith & Watson assert that the narrating “I” is neither a unified nor stable subject; it is “split, fragmented, provisional, multiple” (2001: 60).

The narrating “I” in Abdalla’s *Sauti ya Dhiki* speaks in many voices, “speaking in tongues” as it were, and in doing so does many things. The narrating “I” of the preface written in the Tanzanian commercial capital Dar es Salaam on February 22, 1973, where the poet was newly exiled upon release, differs markedly from the various narrating “I”-s or voices of the poems written in prison. Presenting the poet as a political exile in a neighbouring country, the “I” of the preface consists of a candid, if tacit, recovering of the memory and deciphering of the meaning of a just ended carceral experience. It is characterized by a detached prose at once commenting on and summing up the substance of the prison poetry that preceded its writing. It is “writing about writing” that is self-reflexive and explanatory. It is the narrating “I” that comes in the form of a historian of self, writing the history after the fact, and a critic of one’s own earlier literary productions, produced under different circumstances. On the other hand it would seem the poet crafts each poem such that it has its one or more of its own grammatical narrating “I”-s, speaking in multifarious voices and exhibiting any number of colours and coming in different guises (e.g. defender of truth, political activist, prisoner, potential martyr, sage and agent of change, self-doubter and neophyte, unborn foetus, disinherited kin, patriot, Panafricanist, brother, friend, philosopher, consensus builder, etc).

It bears noting that Smith & Watson distinguish between the narrating “I” and the narrated “I” by viewing the former as the subject of history and the latter as the agent of discourse (2001: 60). In other words the narrating “I” is the speaking subject while the narrated “I” is the object, the protagonist of the narrative. The narrated “I” is a version of the self that the narrating “I” projects to the readers. Yet like the narrating “I” the narrated “I” is also multiple, fragmented, and heterogeneous. The similarity between the tags of the narrating and narrated “I”-s does not imply that they are one and the same thing. The similarity of the tags mainly lies in the fragmentation the “I”-s embody. Yet there are still differences because the narrating “I” comes across as, for example, the philosophical storyteller, while the narrated “I” is the philosopher character whose story is told.

Lastly, the ideological “I” is to be seen, Smith & Watson argue, as the definition of self that is contingent on prevailing ideological, cultural, and historical notions of personhood during one’s own time (2001: 61). In other words, the cultural and historical situatedness of the autobiographical narrator is determined by the particular moment in history in which he or she lived or lives. The overarching ideological concept of self enjoys primacy here, the idea of one’s relations to society or estimation of what is evil or good. All these factors are, therefore, present in the auto-biographer’s time and space and influence his definition of personhood. In this post-structural perspective, it is possible to read Abdalla’s ideological self, particularly his Marxist temperament, as a product of the cultural context that shaped and moulded him. Abdalla had been exposed to and enthused by Marxist literature and ideology that became a crucial catalyst

in his political activism. In essence, Abdalla “seeks to be heard in different terms, to be accountable, to count” (2001: 131-132) as Smith & Watson would put it.

Why Write

The account Abdalla seeks to give of himself, one could argue, is a self-study that attempts to extrapolate upon the carceral experience and imagination with the tools of poetic prosody, and Kimvita, a dialect of Kiswahili that the British hegemony in East Africa minoritized and marginalized. One could argue that Abdalla’s use of Kimvita is not only an indicator of cultural nationalistic tendencies, but represents, in its intent and intensity, a resolute counter-hegemonic endeavour. Yet, the post-colonial context of Abdalla’s writing and incarceration means that the thrust of his counter-hegemony is, in the main, levelled against not a colonial autocrat but a post-colonial autocrat, in Achille Mbembe’s terms (2001: 111). The context is, therefore, both different and the same: the transition from the West or colonial autocrat to the post-colonial autocrat did not change the reality of autocratic rule. In both situations the incarcerated individual feels inhibited, dehumanized, demonized, and deprived, and is probably driven by the emancipatory impulse to narrate herself or himself into being, to tell her or his own story, to count. By writing *Sauti ya Dhiki*, Abdalla may be said to be trying to claim subjectivity, to create himself from the passivity of an “object” as the prison system intends for him, to a speaking rational “subject.” In other words, subject formation or creation is an integral part of the things Abdalla does with poetical words.

I am prompted by the “dialogic reverberations” in Abdalla’s poems in *Sauti ya Dhiki* to extend the frame of reference for the idea of heteroglossia and dialogism beyond the novel genre, contrary to Bakhtin’s earlier configuration of the concept (Bakhtin 2006: 499). I am also attentive to the way in which Abdalla participates in a social dialogue in his poetry, both taking and giving at the same time so that in Bakhtin’s terms, his word “in language is half someone else’s” (2006: 505). I argue that there are in *Sauti ya Dhiki* fragmented, multiple, and heterogenous “I”-s that imbue it with a sense of unmistakable multivocality. In other words, in his collection of poems, Abdalla speaks in tongues, in different languages and accents to articulate the feelings and imaginings of multiple “I”-s. Pinpointing the multiplicity of languages at play in the social heteroglossia, Bakhtin wrote:

Thus an illiterate peasant, miles away from any urban center, naively immersed in an unmoving and for him unshakable everyday world, nevertheless lived in several language systems: he prayed to God in one language (Church Slavic), sang songs in another, spoke to his family in a third and, when he began to dictate petitions to the local authorities through the scribe, he tried speaking yet a fourth language (official –literate language, “paper” language). All these are *different languages*, even from the point of view of abstract socio-dialectological markers (2006: 506).

In a sense, I claim for Abdalla's poetry, the "illiterate peasant's" capacity and tendency to speak "different languages" by different "I"-s that the poet parades to us in an attempt to narrate himself, to orchestrate different themes, to serve his various "semantic and expressive intentions" (Bakhtin 2006: 498). The difference in utterances and voices accounts for the varying subjective positions and subjectivities that are embodied in the "I" of Abdalla's 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 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 not one singular voice, but is perhaps better interpreted as multifarious voices of agony or anguish expressed by the one prison poet (Ohly 1974: 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 post-independence 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.

Swahili Prosody and Poetry as Autobiography

Sauti ya Dhiki is a collection of 40-stanzaed poems that Abdalla wrote in the period of his incarceration between March 1969 and March 1972, with only one poem, *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. 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, his feelings and thoughts, while he languished behind prison walls, so much so that we can follow them "month by month" (1974: 87). I hasten to add that the presentation of these various moods, feelings and thoughts could indeed be seen as instances of self-creation and self-narration whose outcome is the re-enactment of the poet's various selves. The poems trace in almost chronological fashion the wide range of thematic concerns that preoccupied the poet, therefore accentuating the polyphony of his prison poetry. The polyphony enables the poet to do multiple things with words including "carving a public monument out of his private lives" as William Howarth would put it (1980: 92). Yet, what is revealed 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. In other words, Abdalla's poetry comes across as a form of resistance to what he perceives as tyranny and bad governance in post-independence Kenya.

Masking the Message

Yet, there are also instances in which Abdalla uses his poetic ability to do things with words that intentionally mask his message. Abdalla's poem "Mamba" (Crocodile) is a classic example of the use of metaphor as a stratagem for deconstructing a regime he found wanting, immoral, and rotten. Clearly, the recourse to metaphor as a weapon of critique is hardly new across Africa. For instance, under the totalitarian rule of President Kamuzu Banda in Malawi, the country's poets Felix Mnthali, Frank Chipasula, Jack Mapanje, and Lupenga Mphande and others used metaphor as a weapon to undertake the hazardous task of criticizing the regime. As one report shows, overt mention of the president and his cronies would have proved suicidal because it was common knowledge that Banda detained, assassinated, or fed to the crocodiles of Shire River any and all real and imagined critics of his rule.

In harmony with the practice of using metaphor as a subtle tool for deconstructing and disrupting the status quo, Abdalla wrote:

*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, kikomoche 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. (1973: 10)

In this poem written in the *tathlitha* genre, (three lines in each stanza), Abdalla presents the riddle of a rapacious and supercilious reptile 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 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 *nambe* literally meaning 'I speak' rather than to *niandike* / 'I write,' reflecting consciously or unconsciously the orality within which riddles are usually encoded and decoded. 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 and beauty of metaphor is a distinguishing feature of riddles.

On the surface the riddle in Abdalla's poem gives the impression of the simply ludic, even childish pastime. Yet unraveling 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 in which he assails Kenyatta's arrogant leadership and false sense of security and fake immortality. Kenyatta is the *mamba* or crocodile of Abdalla's cryptic poem. The point of the poem is that no matter how powerful Kenyatta may be and no matter how long he holds the reins of power, there is bound to be an end to his rule and his life. Abdalla reminds Kenyatta that as a mortal man his time to expire must surely come, sooner or later.

The overall brevity of the poem, apart from situating it within the tradition of performance of riddles, 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 "post-colonial potentate" or "post-colonial autocrat" who is blinded by a rather warped attitude toward mortality and his own subjectivity. As Mbembe argues, the autocrat's ostensibly absolute subjectivity is hallucinatory, fake and empty. Its facticity lies in caricature only: "The absolute does not exist in reality" (2001: 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 imagining the unimaginable or thinking the unthinkable. As a matter of fact to have the audacity of imagining or foretelling the President's death was considered as treasonable at the time of its writing as literal killing. In a sense, therefore, Abdalla uses poetical words to "assassinate" the tyrant and perhaps gets away with such an audacious action. It goes without saying that artistic taunting and imaginary killing of Kenyatta, the post-colonial potentate, 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 signifies the "killing" of Kenyatta before his actual death. The poet therefore demonstrates that he did not have the fear and inhibition that plagued even the bravest of critics then.

A Range of Miscellaneous Voices

Nonetheless, 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 or imagines and represents his various real and imagined selves. 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 recalls Bakhtin's proposition that an individual does not have one single point of view, but he or she inhabits multiple 'worldviews' through the various social discourses he or she speaks (2006: 450). As mentioned earlier, 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 upon the masses to awake from their slumber and to act against tyranny.

Abdilatif Abdalla captures his affective responses to the ontological and existential reality of the deplorable prison conditions while remaining keenly aware of the fact that writing itself is an act of defiance; a bold reaction to the post-colonial autocrat. And 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. The multiple voices he uses do things with poetic words, that not only help remake the prisoner's unmade world, but also undo the world of the imprisoning state apparatuses. Emerging from prison as a site for writing, *Sauti ya Dhiki* is, therefore, a supreme example of how prison literature can and does do counter-hegemonic things with words.

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