

## REVIEW

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# Namibia in the Poetry of Kavevangua Kahengua

This paper analyses some poems written by a leading Namibian poet, Kavevangua Kahengua. In a review of *Dreams*, an earlier volume of poetry this had reviewer noted Kahengua's

...deep-rooted concern about human relationships, the plight of the poor battling to survive on the margins of post-colonial Namibian society and the struggle to maintain cultural values in times of political and economic transition<sup>1</sup>

Most of the poems in *Dreams*<sup>2</sup> date from 1984 to 2000. The later poems, that form the basis of this study, build on the themes outlined above, but adopt a more critical tone that reflects the author's alarm over the growing gulf between the haves and the have-nots. Namibia has the unenviable distinction of being one of the countries with the largest income disparities in the world, a trend that seems set to continue.

Kahengua points to the selfishness that pervades the society in "Subjectivity", where narrow self-interest takes precedence over rising to the challenge of fashioning a mutually beneficial social contract:

When we engage in discourses  
When we argue  
When we bargain for our views  
To prevail  
Subjectivity pervades  
The employer speaks for maximum profits  
The trade unionist defends the dead wood  
We all know consciously and subconsciously  
Subjectivity is irrational, when each party  
Defends its rationality  
We become pawns of circumstances  
Of survival, survival of the weakest for the strongest thrive  
It depends on whose subjectivity has prevailed  
Whose rhetoric has won by the end of the gruelling hour

This ironic poem highlights the dogged defence of vested interests which, not only in Namibia but within the sub-region as a whole, masquerades as discussions over wages and conditions of service. The Darwinian notion of “the survival of the fittest” tips the scales in favour of the powerful -the “pawns”, as the “weakest”, will never “thrive”! The sad reality is that both, in the long run, are losers.

The soulless nature of capitalism is brought out in a poem that bears that title:

I know capitalism  
It takes more

From us than  
It gives

This ain't no mockery  
 Like a wrestler my sister has  
 Developed sinewy arms  
 As a result of carrying dishes  
 Serving rich customers  
 Where she *casuals*  
 Without benefits

The exploitation of “marginal” people compounds their sense of powerlessness, their perception of leading undignified lives. The poem, however, hints that the day might arise when those who are taken advantage of as casual labourers could flex their muscles.

The city is most often portrayed as soul destroying, in Kahengua's poetry<sup>3</sup> and the satiric poem “Everybody Needs You” catalogues the various pressures the poor are subjected to:

Don't be ill  
 In the city you live on  
 Borrowed hopes  
 Borrowed money  
 Borrowed time  
 You prop the city not  
 Withstanding its massive  
 Weight of debts

The electronic device for  
 the privileged?  
 The TV which supposedly  
 Communicates knowledge,  
 Its document, its licence

Will usurp your valuables  
As you sink into the  
Quicksand of Black  
Economic Impoverishment  
BEI

Granted that some of these problems are self-imposed, but the extravagant gestures of the poor often reflect pathetic attempts at self-validation. A striking feature of Windhoek is the number of “micro-lenders”, as loan sharks prefer to be known! The precarious existence of the needy is underlined by the oft-repeated line: “Don't be ill”, since even “The medical insurance will/ suck you like a tick”.

The self-serving nature of Black Economic Empowerment initiatives is caustically exposed in “Two Bees”:

Two bees  
One whose sting  
Has fatal venom  
Especially if you're allergic -  
This you can swat!

The other bee  
Can inject economic power  
Into your blood  
Especially if you're...  
Sorry, I mean excuse me  
I mean to say if you're  
Black like me  
Though I'm not sure I'm black...  
Just soothe the pain

## Of the injection

The poem focuses on the esoteric manner in which BEE initiatives have been implemented within the region (in South Africa and Zimbabwe, for example) in order to boost the well-connected, rather than as part of transparent affirmative action programmes. Crony capitalism has led to the downfall of many African nations, as avaricious cliques consolidate their grip on “economic power”.

Municipal officials are also targets of Kahengua's satiric gaze, as seen in “Chief Inspector”<sup>44</sup>, where a “Private” is promoted to the rank of “Chief Inspector of Cracks”, in order to ensure that the city is kept spotlessly clean, so that nothing “might harm our Esteemed/ Tourists”. Rather than devote their energies to improving the welfare of the inhabitants of zinc shacks, the officials' priority is looking after “our Tourists of Honor”.

The legacy of inequality is explored in the fascinating poem “From Within”, which deals with the divisions between the rich and the poor:

Down Nelson Mandela Avenue  
 In Klein /Ae//Gams  
 The affluent are privileged  
 To live in the privacy of hills,  
 Among the rocks  
 Like rock rabbits  
 Amid the silence of a cemetery.  
 “BEWARE OF THE DOG”  
 Snarls at me.  
 From behind the fortress of walls  
 Dogs bark at the sound of feet,

Of the presumed poor intruder.  
The clack of the electrified fence  
Makes me an outright alien.

Here down Nelson Mandela Avenue  
In Klein /Ae//Gams  
The chosen occupy large spaces  
In accordance with the master plan  
As laid down to ensure  
The postcolonial continuum.

Here down Nelson Mandela Avenue  
In Klein /Ae//Gams  
The rich discard tidbits  
Amounting to full plates  
That tantalize the watering mouths  
Of the poor.  
Here housing is a status symbol  
Here streets are wide  
As highways,  
Yet happiness is concealed in the privacy  
Of mansions one wonders  
What sins have their owners committed  
To possess such riches!  
Or whose labour have they exploited?

Down Bethlehem Avenue  
*In Katutura ke tu* Our beloved  
Katutura  
In the midst of poverty  
Adults chat animatedly

Children play cheerfully  
 Though days and nights are insecure.

Down Bethlehem Avenue  
 In Katutura ke tu  
 People like ants are huddled  
 In small places.  
 Here shelter is a basic need  
 Streets are as narrow  
 As elephants' trails.  
 People here lick plates filled with  
 Nothing  
 Yet their spirits are visibly exuberant,  
 Against the odds  
 The young are hopeful.

Kahengua has deftly weaved complex emotions into this poem. The stark imagery of the opening stanza highlights the persona's sense of alienation in the "affluent" suburb with the deliberately hybrid name, which blends the German suburban name, Klein Windhoek with the Nama name for Windhoek. The hybrid brings to the fore the "mixed" nature of the Namibian "postcolonial" dispensation. The well heeled enjoy "the privacy of the hills", safely barricaded from the indigent by the "fortress of walls" and the "electrified fence", with dogs as the last line of defence. Ironically "Nelson Mandela Avenue" conjures up symbols of imprisonment, rather than liberation!

Yet the splendid isolation has its charms -the "privacy", the quiet environment, the measure of security which, like magnets, draw the new members of the elite. The segregation of the past, on the basis of race,

is superseded by the new dividing line -wealth. The conspicuous consumption of the suburb contrasts sharply with deprivation of the township. The “alien” “intruder” initially discerns the “master plan” designed to shore up the economic divide between rich and poor, rather than lead the “masses” to the promised land, as revealed in the second stanza. Significantly then, he lapses into religious idioms to explain these divisions which suggest that social transformation is not possible. One may, however, argue that the change reflects a pragmatic acceptance of the fundamental principle of biblical economics: “To him who has will more be given.” “Mansions”, “sins”, “wonders”, call to mind the divine “master plan” which is deliberately “concealed” from human understanding pending the final revelation. Significantly, Bethlehem is associated with the lowly, “*In Katutura ke tu*”. The concluding verse of the hymn “O little town of Bethlehem” resonates with the images of joy and spiritual regeneration found in the last two stanzas of Kahengua's poem:

O holy Child of Bethlehem  
Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin, and enter in;  
Be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us,  
Our Lord Immanuel.

The “intruder” feels more at home in “Bethlehem Avenue”, which throbs with life, than in the “silence of the cemetery” he experiences “Down Nelson Mandela Avenue”; he identifies more with the “basic” shelters of the poor than with the “mansions” of the “affluent”, despite the



privations. Ironically the:

Children play cheerfully  
Though days and nights are insecure.

The prevailing insecurity validates the ostentatious security that is the hallmark of Southern African suburban bliss -possessions are precious and, "From Within", the better-offs try to secure what they have painstakingly acquired through their "labour", as opposed to "sins"! Kahengua's wry humour points to the paradox of the relatively carefree existence of those who have "nothing".

"From Within" composed November 2002 and its hopeful concluding note contrasts markedly with the bleaker vision of "A Happy Poem" written in 2006:

My heart yearns  
To write a happy poem  
But my mind  
Denies me the will

A happy poem  
For the street children  
Is a misfit.  
Holding my gaze  
Beyond the horizon  
I see a bleak  
Bleak future  
In their eyes

Kavevangua Kahengua's poetry reveals the poet's sensitive

assessment of the perspectives of various sections of Namibian society. His ironic style seeks to reconcile “the hopes and fears” of different groups, by drawing attention to the structural inequality that lies at the heart of the nation, which urgently needs to be addressed in a bid to counter the “bleak/ Bleak future” he foresees.

NOTE

<sup>1</sup>See M.Z. Malaba. “Kavevangua Kahengua’s Dreams”. *Englishes: Contemporary Literatures in English*. No. 29, Anno 10, 2006, pp. 83 - 95.

<sup>2</sup>Kavevangua Kahengua. *Dreams*. Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan, 2002.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, “Old Man Walking” and “Here I want to live” in *Dreams*, op. cit., pp. 31, 12.

<sup>4</sup>“Chief Inspector”, *The African*. June/July 2005, p. 20.