Review of Mathare: An Urban Baston of Anti-Oppression Struggle in Kenya

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Through simple language, the book details the life history of a Nairobi informal settlement through the eyes and experiences of a fourth general dweller. In a Kenyan context, such an account in book format is shared by researchers or journalists who parachute to the location. Gathanga Ndung’u shares his life history intertwined with that of Mathare. Mathere informal settlement is both understood by those who have sought to give it an unbiased perspective and at the same time misunderstood by those driven-by biased perceptions. This is the dichotomy that the author of the book seeks to clarify.

Gathanga Ndung’u brings forth the similarity between the colonial government and Kenya’s post-independence on pp.13 when he talks about how the “colonial government razed down many houses in Mathare.” Post-independent Kenya security agencies have on several occasions razed down informal settlements squatters' houses or even forest encroachers' houses in the name of enforcing a government police or court ruling. Gathanga Ndung’u in his work draws attention to the need for decolonization of the Kenyan state security agencies. This is a central theme in the book that Gathanga Ndung’u has weaved throughout his book.

Despite six decades of independence, most Kenyans live hand-to-mouth, with most city dwellers residing in the informal settlement in a similar way as many Africans lived during the eight decades of colonization. As a third-generation descendant of Mau Mau fighters, I perceived Gathanga Ndung’u’s works as an expression of a desire to keep the fire burning in the hope that despite harsh realities, there is light at the end of the tunnel. The writer does capture this point well on pp.34 by arguing that “poor youth have been criminalized by the same system that oppressed their grandparents and parents and now in oppressing them.” During my work as a journalist in Mathare, I have witnessed a prevailing degree of resilience that the writer talks about.

That light at the end of the tunnel does occasionally get dim due to state failures and misrules, but Gathanga Ndung’u and the people of Mathare keep pushing the agenda that human rights are central to all who live in Kenya. Mathare as a settlement has survived and continues to survive repeated cases of demolition and land grabbing due to the value that comes with proximity to the central region of Nairobi city. Through this argument, the writer is putting across the argument that Kenya's post-independent leadership has been largely preoccupied with the primitive accumulation of public resources for self-enrichment at the expense of the wider public good.
In the conclusion, the writer is clear that more needs to be done for an equal and just Kenyan society. Gathanga Ndung’u calls for reform and restructuring of the police force, a force that has remained a symbol of neo-colonization or oppression for human rights defenders.

The book comes through, first as an argument that despite all the odds Gathanga Ndung’u and others will continue to pursue their goals despite setbacks. Secondly, Gathanga Ndung’u is part of a generation of Kenya that has opted for the book to push ahead with the argument that Kenyan freedom fighters, The Mau Mau might have lost the war but not the argument that Kenya's inequality and dehumanizing structures need redress. Gathanga Ndung’u’s book brings forth struggles by a generation of rights activists who have more than once since a tender age have been victimized by the state security agencies. Through his writing one does see his clarity of thoughts and consistency in his life journey as a rights defender. The book does add to the knowledge that goes along with documenting the historical journey of rights defenders in Kenya.

*Patrick Mugo Mugo is a peace researcher with an interest in conflict transformation, media and conflict relationships, electoral violence, and complex humanitarian crises. He has formal studies in journalism and communication, political science and sociology, and peace studies. The main focus of his professional journalism career over the past two decades has been on the humanitarian crisis, insecurity, peace negotiations, electoral processes, and climate change across Eastern, Central, Horn, and Western African regions. He has more than ten publications on resource conflict, food insecurity, radicalization and terrorism, media and conflict transformation, electoral violence, sustainable development/peace, and human rights.

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