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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***Aesthetics of urbanity in *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories***Daniel Mulwa Katiku¹, Charles Kebaya¹ & Larry Ndivo¹¹Department of Linguistics and Languages, Machakos University, KenyaCorrespondence: katikude@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Cities are all described in literature as places where ordinary and often harsh experiences of ghetto life are transformed into aesthetic experiences. Although there have been a number of studies that have investigated urbanism in African literature, few have looked at how the short stories of the present-day Nairobi Kenyan represent aesthetics of urbanity as representational tools for critiquing the ethical dissonance embedded in urban existence. This paper explores how the selected stories make Nairobi's ghetto a lived and imagined urban space, reflecting aesthetics of urbanity in the work. The research was qualitative with descriptive research design. The target population was the fifteen stories in *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories*, of which eight stories were chosen for their prominent portrayal of urban life in Nairobi's informal settlements. A textual analysis with close reading of the selected stories was used to collect data, and thematic content analysis was employed to identify and interpret recurring patterns related to urbanity. Michel de Certeau's Urban Imaginary Theory was used as a guide for the analysis. The results indicate that the selected stories exhibit a variety of characteristics of visual imagery, spatial representations, soundscapes and sensory nuances, aesthetic representations, sensory nuances and aesthetic implications on urban identity. These elements show how visual imagery, auditory cues, and linguistic expression interact to construct a complex and emotionally charged urban experience. Visual depictions of decay, such as waste accumulation, overcrowded housing, and derelict infrastructure, function symbolically to critique systemic neglect and social inequality. Auditory elements including traffic noise, marketplace chatter, and outbursts of aggression, underscore the chaotic nature of urban life and evoke the tension, urgency, and volatility embedded in the cityscape. The study concludes that urban aesthetics in *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories* were reflected through imagery, soundscapes, and language, capturing both the vibrancy and decay of city life. The text portrayed urban spaces as places of neglect and overcrowding, yet full of cultural expression and movement. The paper makes a significant contribution to the field of African urban literary studies by introducing the idea of the localized narrative as a means of gaining a more comprehensive understanding of aesthetics of urban life today.

KEYWORDS: aesthetics, Bodii, Nairobi, nuances, urban, soundscapes**Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**

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1. Introduction

This paper examines aesthetics of urbanity in *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories*. It argues that visual imagery, auditory cues, and linguistic expression interact to construct a complex and emotionally charged urban experience. Visual depictions of decay, such as waste accumulation, overcrowded housing, and derelict infrastructure, function symbolically to critique systemic neglect and social inequality each contributing to a broader understanding of how urban spaces are experienced, negotiated, and imagined. By focusing on this aesthetics, the study contributes to the urban literature by showing how the ordinary and often harsh experiences of ghetto life are transformed into aesthetic experiences.

Scholars have shown that the city is not only a physical environment but a place where social life is mediated through processes of negotiation and contestation of identity, belonging, and presence. Research on urban literature has revealed that cities, in general, are described as “broken” and “anomic” spaces with social inequality, alienation, and violence (Mallan, 2018). In recent years aesthetics has come to be seen as having a much broader meaning than the beauty of art, including the beauty of ordinary human experiences and everyday spatial encounters (Light & Smith, 2005). Routine activities like walking through streets, taking public transportation, informal working, and living within neighborhoods can come to have symbolic and aesthetic value in literary texts. It presents a new way of reading the urban narrative, highlighting the potential of everyday experiences to reveal underlying social, moral and existential truths.

Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories introduces Nairobi’s ghetto, not as a backdrop to the story, but as the story itself. The narratives depict the ghetto as a place of dynamic sociality in which beauty and suffering, hope and violence, and survival occur at the same time. The diverse experiences of the people living in the city are made visible, and their ability to manage challenging economic and social dynamics is demonstrated, through the lens of everyday life. The exhibition does not merely depict this ghetto as a place of suffering, but rather the elements of daily life that inform the urban experience and human interaction.

Charton and Rodriguez highlight the complexity of Nairobi as a capital city in Africa, noting its unrecognized status and transient nature for many inhabitants (47). They emphasize Nairobi’s history as a city of migrants, rooted more in rural traditions than in urban identity, leading to a fragmented urban landscape. Despite the disappearance of racial segregation, social segregation persists, shaping the city’s diverse communities and residential areas. The scholars argue that Nairobi defies a singular identity, instead comprising multiple identities across different communities. Additionally, Nairobi is depicted as a contradictory city, associated with issues such as slums and crime, which signify urban policy failures.

Roger Kurtz delves into the significance of the city in the evolution of Kenyan postcolonial literature (Kurtz, 4). He suggests that the city serves as a metaphor for the entirety of Kenya, embodying its essence rather than merely representing a fraction of Kenyan society. Kurtz’s portrayal of Nairobi as a liminal space, where established meanings and identities undergo constant examination and transformation, highlights the city’s dynamic nature. Within this context, the city emerges not only as a backdrop for struggles and feelings of isolation but also as a fertile ground for creativity and the emergence of fresh perspectives and subjectivities. Through his exploration, Kurtz sheds light on the relationship between urban environments and the narratives they inspire, underscoring the numerous roles of cities in shaping the cultural landscape of postcolonial literature in Kenya.

Tom Odhiambo argues that the city represents a powerful symbol of modernity in Africa due to its advanced industrial, economic, and infrastructural development compared to other regions within postcolonial African countries (Odhiambo, 46). The city of Nairobi in Kenya is highlighted as a prime example, offering writers abundant material for literary exploration. In popular Kenyan fiction, Nairobi serves as a significant marker of the opportunities that modernity presents to migrants. However, Odhiambo suggests that the pursuit of modernity yields varying outcomes for individuals, contingent upon their ability to interpret and exploit the city’s resources strategically. Odhiambo points out how urban life is complicated, and whether people succeed or fail depends on how well they deal with city living (47).

Varma explores the portrayal of urbanity in twentieth and twenty-first-century literature and culture, focusing on the emergence of new subjects within the postcolonial city. Through analyzing historical and contemporary debates, Varma examines postcolonial fictions set in cities such as London, Nairobi, and Bombay (Varma, 6). She discusses the significance of cities within postcolonial theory and culture, highlighting their role in constructing public spheres and identities. Additionally, Varma delves into the representation of urban spaces as sites of contending narratives, reflecting global culture and postcolonial development. She also addresses postcolonial feminist citizenship as a political project challenging neoliberal constraint on public spaces and rights, emphasizing the need to strategically “read” the city and seize available opportunities. The work though giving valuable information on metropolitan urban centres such as London and Bombay is at the risk of ob-

scuring the diversity of African urban presentation in literature. This gives space to question how this localized short story, based on the daily challenges and survival, contextualizes the concept of the city outside the general discussion of postcolonialism. This is an essential way into the complexity of the contradictions of Nairobi as a postcolonial city, as well as the richer textures of art and moral in the way it is represented. The reviewed studies show that Nairobi is an urban environment that is heterogeneous, dynamic and contested with migration, modernity and social inequality. They, however, mainly look at the city on a social and/or post-colonial aspect, with little consideration of the everyday ghetto experience in short stories. This study seeks to fill this gap, with a focus on the Nairobi city spaces that are marginal.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design within a qualitative research approach to examine the portrayal of urbanity in *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories*. The target population comprised the 15 short stories in the anthology. Purposive sampling was used to select eight stories—*The Cell*, *The Mess*, *Love Must be Crazy*, *My Alu*, *Peggy and Ndagala*—because they prominently depict urban experiences, informal settlements, and the everyday realities of Nairobi's working-class communities. Data were collected through textual analysis involving close reading of the selected stories. The analysis focused on narrative elements such as characterization, setting, language, imagery, and symbolism to identify representations of urban life. The collected data were analysed using thematic content analysis, where recurring patterns and themes related to urbanity were identified, coded, categorized, and interpreted in relation to the study objectives. The interpretation of the findings was guided by Michel de Certeau's Urban Imaginary Theory. The theory provided a framework for examining how the selected stories construct the city as a lived and imagined space, and how characters' everyday experiences shape the representation of urbanity within Nairobi's ghetto environment.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Visual imagery and spatial representations

Visual imagery of decay in urban centres is a common literary technique used to highlight neglect, overcrowding, and deteriorating infrastructure. Scholars like Sharon Zukin argue that urban literature often portrays the city as a space of both growth and decline, where poverty and disorder exist alongside progress. As Stephanie Newell notes, urban fiction often "foregrounds the aesthetics of disrepair as a mode of critiquing postcolonial modernity" (Newell, 57). Through such depictions, literature captures the complexities of urban living, illustrating how neglect and survival coexist in the modern city. The visual aesthetics in these stories function as more than representational devices; they offer critical commentary on the relationship between infrastructure, class inequality, and institutional neglect.

In *The Cell*, the police station is portrayed as a place of extreme filth and suffering, emphasizing the neglect and harsh conditions faced by detainees, "...The floor was messy. Vomit, urine and shit struggling for space on that floor..." (Pg 34). This illustration offers a vivid picture of crowded and unhygienic conditions which remove fundamental human worth. The imagery demonstrates the city's neglect through the presentation of public institutions that reflect urban decay which extends to improper treatment of humanity. The extent of neglect reveals a double failure of inadequate care and defective institutional systems which treat their most vulnerable members unfairly. The story illustrates the faulty urban management structure and judicial system by showing that powerless individuals receive the poorest results of societal breakdown. Therefore, the physicality of filth becomes a symbolic medium through which powerlessness, overcrowding, and systemic rot are materialized.

In *The Mess*, heaps of garbage through which Kandoya moves, represents both physical deterioration and social decline which plague the city. The essential job he does as a waste collector fails to earn him respect because urban societies tend to dismiss individuals who carry out vital yet unimportant work. The meticulous, almost ritualistic process of waste collection, "He would go behind a house, open the small gate, remove the bucket...", functions as a performative act of resilience amid institutional absence. The uncollected trash serves as a symbol of municipal failure that results from poor waste management practices which worsen the living conditions of the area. Beyond physical deterioration the story reveals a social problem because people ridicule Kandoya instead of recognizing the value of his work. Through his story, it is seen how urban neglect causes a growing divide between economic survival and dignity while showing how environmental degradation impacts the people who live within this area. The buildup of waste becomes a metonym for social accumulation, of neglect, of inequality, of bureaucratic indifference.

Urban decay and neglect are evident in the story *Love Must be Crazy*, which emphasizes the harsh living

conditions in the city. The words “desolate” and “derelict” used in the story immediately establish a setting of abandonment, where infrastructure has deteriorated beyond repair:

Finally, we reached the place. It was desolate. Derelict. Papa led the way, and we followed. We found it difficult to walk in the mud. The path between the dilapidated structures was too narrow for smooth passage.. (Pg 50)

These descriptions reinforce the themes of confinement, immobility, and exclusion. The architecture does not merely frame the story; it enacts it. Narrow spaces and collapsing walls restrict characters’ physical and emotional movement, embodying a kind of spatial determinism where hope is repeatedly obstructed. The narrow, muddy pathways between dilapidated structures highlight poor urban planning and overcrowding, common in neglected estates and informal settlements. The difficulty of movement in this space symbolizes both physical and social struggle, reinforcing the harsh realities of urban poverty.

The lack of proper drainage, crumbling buildings, and impassable walkways create a strong sense of confinement and hardship, where residents must navigate not just the city’s physical challenges but also its social and economic limitations. This aesthetic of neglect and deterioration reflects the broader theme of urban inequality, where some areas thrive while others are left to decay. Mitullah argues that neglected urban spaces in India often reflect deep-rooted social and economic disparities, where the poor are forced to live in overcrowded and poorly maintained environments (Mitullah, 98). These areas lack basic services like sanitation, proper roads, and waste management, making daily life difficult for residents. Taylor argues that urban neglect is often a result of uneven development, where investments focus on wealthier areas while poorer neighbourhoods deteriorate.

Waste accumulation and poor sanitation are key indicators of urban neglect and decay, shaping the visual aesthetics of the city in *Bodii & Other Ghetto Stories*. The presence of uncollected garbage, overflowing waste bins, and foul smells creates an image of disorder, abandonment, and health hazards. In many neglected urban areas, waste management systems fail, leaving residents to endure unsanitary conditions. These images contribute to the broader theme of urban deterioration, where essential services collapse, forcing people to adapt to unhealthy environments.

In *The Mess*, the meticulous yet never-ending cycle of waste collection highlights the failure of the system: “...He would go behind a house, open the small gate, remove the bucket, and then meticulously transfer the contents into his own large bucket...” (Pg 53). The ritual-like nature of the process symbolizes the inefficiency of urban governance, where essential services are either slow or absent, leaving communities to deal with their own waste. The decaying urban environment is emphasized through the imagery of waste piling up and creating unbearable stench, “...The buckets remained unemptied. Days went by, and the stench grew stronger. Then, people started moving out of the estate...” (Pg 55). People are left with no choice but to leave, highlighting the temporary and unstable nature of life in neglected urban areas. These descriptions show how poor sanitation and uncollected waste define certain parts of Nairobi city, creating a stark contrast between well-maintained spaces and those left to decay.

The presence of streets in urban literature serves as a key visual aesthetic, shaping the way characters move and interact with the city. Streets are not just physical pathways but also symbolic spaces of connection, separation, and change. According to Shamloo, Vahidbafandeh and Vahidbafandeh, streets define a city’s structure, influencing how people navigate, perceive, and experience urban spaces (Vahidbafandeh and Vahidbafandeh, 22). They can represent order or chaos, opportunity or restriction, depending on how they are depicted. Wide, well-maintained roads may suggest prosperity and accessibility, while narrow, congested, or deteriorating streets often symbolize urban decay, inequality, or marginalization. The layout of streets, whether grid-like, winding, or disorganized, also reflects the city’s history, planning, and social divisions, reinforcing themes of movement, restriction, or exclusion.

In neglected urban areas, streets take on an entirely different aesthetic, often marked by dust, potholes, mud, and overcrowding. Montgomery argues that in many cities, streets mirror the lived realities of the people who use them, with some functioning as vibrant economic spaces while others become sites of struggle, crime, and informal settlements (Montgomery, 93). The way characters move through, get lost in, or avoid certain streets helps to define the city’s personality and the experiences of its residents. In urban narratives, the depiction of street lighting, traffic, pedestrian flow, and architectural surroundings contributes to the overall atmosphere and mood, shaping how both readers and characters engage with the city. Whether streets are bustling or desolate, welcoming or dangerous, they remain central to the aesthetic and lived experience of urban life.

The presence of street vendors in *My Alu* highlights the hustler mentality and economic survival in urban spaces: "...I got to the gate where the hawkers were selling different foodstuffs and went to the old Swahili lady in *buibui* who was known for selling the most delicious alu..." (Pg 60). This captures the vibrant but informal nature of street trade, where vendors rely on selling food to make a living. Hawking is an essential part of the urban economy, providing affordable goods while also reflecting the struggles of small-scale traders who operate in uncertain conditions. The mention of the old Swahili lady in a *buibui* adds a cultural element, showing how different communities adapt to city life through entrepreneurship. This imagery contributes to the visual aesthetics of the city, where streets are not just spaces of movement but also sites of commerce and daily survival.

3.2 Soundscapes and sensory nuances

Urban spaces are faced with multiple overlapping noises which establish their distinctive auditory quality. Street explains that urban soundscapes contain two types of sounds: those that are intended and those that occur accidentally including traffic rhythms and market calls combined with the disorderly mix of voices and sirens and distant music sounds. Soundscapes of the city create an energy level and rhythm and tension which capture the city's dynamic nature with its chaotic elements. Literary descriptions of urban noise together with echoes and sound clashes make readers experience the city's living rhythm by bringing them into its audio environment. Hasse argues that noises ranging from street vendor shouting to estate conversations to post-conflict silence create physical emotions within the city (Hasse, 49). The city speaks through sound, and literature captures this cacophony to represent its pulse, disorder, and vitality.

In *Bodii*, the depiction of urban nightlife and entertainment highlights the city's sensory and social transformation after dark, "...Bodii never worked during the day; he worked at night. He was a sole bouncer at the only Estate Disco club..." (Pg 15). The extract captures the vibrant unpredictable nature of nightlife through its representation of loud music and flashing lights and overlapping voices that dominate the urban environment. The disco functions as a leisure zone for escape but its security measures create exclusive entry barriers controlled by *Bodii's* position as a bouncer. The scene illustrates how the city operates between economic survival and entertainment by showing that it never sleeps while changing its functions between day and night. The nightlife aesthetic enriches urban immersion by showing music performance and human movement alongside social encounters which fuse entertainment with constant risks of strife.

In *Peggy*, the author illustrates the impatience and fast-paced nature of urban transportation, where individuals are always in motion, adjusting their routes and schedules to keep up with the city's rhythm, "...He drove on but turned at the next street to check if she had come..." (Pg 12). This fleeting moment captures the chaotic yet structured nature of public transport, where vehicles weave through crowded streets, competing for space. The streets, filled with honking cars, revving engines, and hurried footsteps, symbolize both possibility and disorientation, where individuals must navigate the ever-changing urban landscape. Tartia observes that urban transit spaces function as 'non-places', where movement overrides personal identity, turning streets and transport hubs into temporary yet essential sites of urban interaction (Tartia, 190). Public transport soundscapes create an environment where noise is an unavoidable part of existence. Bain, Gray and Rodgers further argue that urban spaces are shaped by speed and accessibility, where individuals must constantly adapt to congestion, delays, and alternative routes. This aligns with Urban Aesthetics Theory, suggests that the visual and auditory elements of a city contribute to its sensory and emotional impact. Auditory and olfactory aesthetics reinforce the thematic undercurrents of urgency, surveillance, exclusion, and exhaustion. The depiction in *Peggy* mirrors this idea, where the movement of vehicles and the rush to find someone reflect the city's restless energy, reinforcing how urban spaces are defined not just by physical structures but by the sounds, actions, and hurried choices of its inhabitants.

3.3 Aesthetic Representations and Sensory Nuances

The use of raw dialogue, fragmented speech, code-switching and street slang comprise urban aesthetics. Unlike formal language, slang is fluid, dynamic, and context-driven, reflecting the diverse identities, cultures, and social hierarchies within urban spaces. Battistella (5) posits that whether through ghetto talk, playful insults, or coded expressions, slang brings out the city's energy, tension, and informal social rules, making it a crucial aesthetic feature of urban storytelling.

The Cell uses raw insults and aggression which reflect the harsh urban realities and everyday struggles in city life. The detainees' profanity-laden outburst punctuates the scene with jarring intensity, reinforcing the

emotional volatility and psychological strain that defines life under systemic oppression. The repetition of expletives, the tonal aggression, and the fragmented structure of speech collectively simulate an auditory overload, echoing the dissonance and disempowerment endured by the urban poor. Here, sound is not simply a background element but a central narrative device that heightens the affective impact of the city's oppressive institutions.

The description of the detention cell as “messy... vomit, urine, and shit struggling for space” (Pg 34) employs grotesque imagery to convey both physical and moral decay. The grotesque becomes symbolic; it critiques how urban institutions like the police station embody rot and dysfunction. The cell, here, is not only a physical holding space but a metaphor for the city itself: overrun, chaotic, dehumanizing.

Tone also plays a critical role, the shift from desperation to sarcasm or resignation within urban voices reflects an internalized sense of futility: “...SHIT... Yes... all of you. You are all shit. Policemen, Shit... Shit... Shit...” (Pg33). This illustration highlights anger, frustration, and defiance, especially in interactions with law enforcement. Whether defiant or broken, these tonal shifts emphasize how the city emotionally manipulates its inhabitants. These detainee's words are not just insults but a form of protest, expressing resistance against a system that dehumanizes him. This confrontational and crude style of speech is common in high-stress urban environments, where individuals must assert themselves to be heard. The language is not refined or polite because urban interactions often demand boldness, confrontation, and emotional intensity.

In these urban narratives, street language represents resistance, resilience, and adaptability, allowing marginalized groups to challenge authority and create their own cultural spaces. The authors in the selected short-stories use harsh, abrasive tones and fragmented syntax to reflect the fractured lives and mental states of those navigating urban decay. The city is often painted in grim hues, using imagery such as crumbling buildings, garbage-strewn alleys, and rusted iron gates to symbolize neglect, both societal and personal. These aesthetic choices, especially through tone, diction, and metaphor, evoke the sensory weight of urban life, offering more than surface-level representation by immersing the reader in the emotional, visual, and auditory experience of the city. This visual decay stands as a metaphor for moral deterioration and institutional failure.

3.4 Aesthetic implications on urban identity

The selected stories not only serve to illuminate the texture of urban life but also contribute profoundly to the construction of urban identity. Central to this process is the way in which aesthetic elements are used to configure the city as both a spatial and psychological landscape. The decaying physical environment, cracked walls, overflowing gutters, dimly lit alleys, serves as a metaphor for the fractured self. These visual motifs underscore the instability of urban identity, where the self is constantly subjected to erasure, reconstruction, and performance. For instance, in *The Mess* and *Ndagala*, the protagonists' social identities are inextricably linked to the material degradation of the spaces they inhabit. Their association with waste, dirt, and informal labour reflects how urban environments assign symbolic value to individuals based on their spatial and economic positioning.

Similarly, the linguistic choices, particularly the use of street slang, code-switching, and fragmented dialogue, shape urban identity as something performative and adaptive. Language becomes a site of resistance and self-fashioning. The fluidity and inventiveness of urban speech underscore the dynamic nature of identity in city spaces, where cultural hybridity, socio-political marginalization, and economic precarity compel individuals to constantly reinvent themselves. As such, linguistic style in the text is not only expressive of cultural belonging but also emblematic of survival in a volatile urban milieu.

Tone plays a critical role in marking the psychological texture of urban identity. The oscillation between irony, aggression, resignation, and humour reflects the complex emotional register of city dwellers. These tonal shifts suggest that urban identity is never singular or stable; it is a mosaic of affective responses to the pressures, contradictions, and ambiguities of city life. For example, the sarcasm expressed in *Real Men* function as a coping mechanism developed by individuals navigating unjust social dynamics. Here, tone becomes an aesthetic strategy for articulating both defiance and vulnerability, further complicating our understanding of identity in urban contexts.

Cumulatively, these aesthetic choices shape perceptions of the urban social fabric, portraying it as fragmented yet interdependent, alienating yet communal. The juxtaposition of overcrowded spaces with emotional isolation, or public performances of masculinity with private despair, reflects a collective identity that is both shaped by and resistant to the structural realities of the city. In this sense, urban identity emerges not as a fixed category but as a

contested space, formed through interactions with the built environment, institutional power, and cultural narratives.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the aesthetics of urbanity in *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories* and established that the anthology presents aesthetics elements and how these elements contribute to the representation of urbanity. The findings demonstrate that visual imagery, auditory cues, and linguistic expression interact to construct a complex and emotionally charged urban experience. Visual depictions of decay, such as waste accumulation, overcrowded housing, and derelict infrastructure, function symbolically to critique systemic neglect and social inequality. Auditory elements including traffic noise, marketplace chatter, and outbursts of aggression, underscore the chaotic nature of urban life and evoke the tension, urgency, and volatility embedded in the cityscape. The study further concludes that language, particularly the use of street slang, code-switching, and fragmented dialogue, emerges as a tool through which characters navigate identity, resistance, and survival in an unstable socio-cultural urban environment. Guided by Michel de Certeau's Urban Imaginary Theory, the analysis shows that these aesthetic strategies deepen the reader's understanding of urbanity not only as a setting but as a lived experience.

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