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### **Poetry as Instrument: Reading Selected Poems of Mutabaruka**

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## Poetry as Instrument: Reading Selected Poems of Mutabaruka

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### Abstract

Over the years the canon of Caribbean poetry has shifted and expanded, drawing both on oral and literary traditions. Jamaican canonical poet-singer and a *Rastafarian* Dub poet, Allan Mutabaruka (b.1952) draws sustenance from the oral traditions. This paper focuses on Mutabaruka's attitudes to the question of 'black identity', women and nature. Mutabaruka uses poetry as an instrument of social change. His central concern is to go back to his Pre-colonial African roots and to search for 'black identity' lost in the quagmire of history. "The world needs rearranging" says Mutabaruka. Orality is central to Mutabaruka's art. West Indies had a very rich store-house of folk culture and oral traditions. The colonizers systematically glorified their culture and dwarfed the culture of the colonized Caribbeans. This aspect of colonization has been described by Spivak as "Othering". Coming to the question of Mutabaruka's attitude to women it might be said that Mutabaruka's attitude in this regard remains somewhere in-between the stand taken by the *Rastafarian* hardliners of Jamaica or Ethiopia and the *Rastafarians* of Texas. In one of his interviews Mutabaruka supports polygamy. "Man is by nature polygamous" says Mutabaruka. But this is only one aspect of his thought. His poems reveal a slightly altered attitude. Mutabaruka's attitude to nature and environment too has been influenced to a great extent by the *Rasta* line of thinking. *Rasta* ideal is environmentally sound and it runs parallel to the ideas of environment popularized by Cheryl Glotfelty, Harol Fromm and other eco-thinkers of the U.S.A. The *Rastas* question the much-hyped capitalist slogan of 'progress' and advancement of civilization at the cost of nature and loss of agrarian base. Living in harmony with the environment and the laws of nature is one of the central ideas of *Rastafarianism*. Mutabaruka's 'Ecology-Poem' subscribes to that idea.

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**Keywords:** Black liberation ideology, *Rastafarianism*, Dub poetry, Orality, Women, Anti-capitalist

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**J**amaican canonical poet-singer and a *Rastafarian* Dub poet, Mutabaruka (b.1952), born Allan Hope, grew up in one of the ghettos of Kingston, Jamaica. From his teenage years Mutabaruka was conscious of his black roots. In the late 1960s and 1970s there was an uproaring of Black Awareness in Jamaica. Mutabaruka was drawn into the vortex of that movement. At heart a revolutionary, he read Elridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, a banned memoir written in Folsom State Prison. In this book Cleaver launches scathing attack against the oppressive politics of America and scans racial relations. An adherent to black liberation ideology, Cleaver identifies himself as a black soul colonized by an oppressive white society that projects its parochial view of life as 'eternal truth'. Mutabaruka was immensely influenced by the famous *Autobiography of Malcolm X* written jointly by Malcolm X and

Alex Haley. The book gives an account of Malcolm as a human right activist and deals with such questions as black pride, Black Nationalism, Pan-Africanism etc. which deeply stirred Mutabaruka. During Mutabaruka's formative years Kamau Brathwaite (b. 1930) had been tracing black cultural history both in Africa and throughout the African Diasporas of the world. The West Indian intellectual from Martinique, Aime Cesaire who is thought to have coined the term 'negritude' (1947) was also stressing the need of affirming black identity. Long before his initiation into poetry and performance, Mutabaruka came in contact with Mickey Smith, "a Jamaican dub poet and raconteur of the bewilderment of the present" who was "stoned to death outside his Kingston home in 1983" (Barnes, Web) and Oku Onourah who classified himself as dub poet and constructed his poems on "reggae music" (Arnold et al, Web)

Another important formative influence on Mutabaruka was *Rastafarianism*. Born into a Catholic family, he became a *Rastafarian* in his teens. While working in the Jamaican Telephone Company, Mutabaruka began examining the *Rastafarian* life-style. *Rastafarianism* is a monotheistic Politico - spiritual movement that arose in the 1930s in Jamaica. Its adherents worship Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, as Jesus incarnate. He is the 'Jah' or God the Father to the *Rastafarians*. It is significant that *Rasta* movement became very popular in Jamaica, a country with predominantly Christian culture. Almost 93% of the Jamaican people were the black African descendants of slaves and they found in *Rasta* path something very close to their black roots. Rejecting the Western society dominated by the white peoples and questioning the centrality of Babylon as described in the Christian New Testament, *Rasta* people proclaim Africa and also Zion as the original birth-place of mankind. Call to repatriation to Africa has been one of its central concerns. *Rastafarianism* opposes institutionalized religion and Mutabaruka found particular interest in this aspect of *Rasta* life style. He supports the *Rastafari* attempt to 'deconstruct' the power structure of English grammar and structures which are metonymic of the hegemonic controls exercised by the British on Black peoples throughout Caribbean and African history. The *Rastafarians* have made several attempts to liberate the language from within. Although the basis of *Rasta* speech is Jamaican Creole, it is deliberately altered in a number of ways. For example, in Jamaican Creole the first person singular is 'me' (Me see mi friend) but the plural is 'we'. Joseph Owen in his book *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* has stated that to the *Rastafarians* both 'me' and 'we' as objects of sentence are always governed by the subject, in a way in which white Europeans governed the slaves. Consequently, the *Rastas* insist on the use of 'I' as the singular personal pronoun and 'I-n-I' as the plural and reflexives are 'I-sel' for 'myself' and 'I-n-I sel' for 'ourselves'. Even the possessive 'my' and the objective 'me' have been replaced by 'I' (e. g. 'This is I land' instead of 'This is my land'). He found *Rasta* way of life meaningful and worth living for. Such was the impact of this faith upon Mutabaruka that he stopped wearing shoes, stopped combing his hair, started growing locks and altered his diet.

Over the years the canon of Caribbean poetry has shifted and expanded, drawing both on oral and literary traditions. Dub poetry draws sustenance from the oral traditions. It is poetry of the 'common man'. Mutabaruka sings in his 'Dis Poem Lyrics' –

dis poem will not be amongst great literary works  
 will not be recited by poetry enthusiasts  
 will not be quoted by politicians nor men of religion  
 dis poem s knives bombs guns blood fire

blazin for freedom  
 ('DisPoem' Ll.19-23)\*

It arose in response to an extra-ordinary challenge thrown down to Caribbean artists by the intelligentsia to prove that 'common man' also can create uncommon art. It articulates the complex union of oral and written forms – 'a synthesis between the oral forms and writings as an emergent discourse' (Isha 211). Ruth Finnegan in her book *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* writes about oral poetry as a distinct social phenomenon whereby the position of the poet, the function of his poem and possible relations between literature and society remain dominant issues. OgeOgede, one of the contributors to *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, has analyzed how oral poetry is used for negotiating social relationships and in mobilizing the political, religious and social sphere. It voices livid consciousness and utilizes 'Patois' i.e. the dialects of the common people, different from the standard language of a country. The other important aspect of dub poetry that influenced Mutabaruka is that many of the dub poems can be set to music and have a strong performative side. Two important dub poets who greatly influenced Mutabaruka are Linton Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah. Like them, Mutabaruka experimented with the poetry of protest and exhortation. Mutabaruka's two important collections, *The First Poems* and *The Next Poems* have been acclaimed as the 'double-barreled' dub collections, though Mutabaruka sometimes resists the label 'dub'. We know that creolization is concerned not only with a question of evolving a hybrid kind of language, but "a particular way of thinking about identity in the Caribbean" (Otto 98) also. The development of the creole language, again, owes a lot to some thinkers who spearheaded the movement that purported to trace the origin of the Caribbean language to its African roots. This is one of the agenda of Negritude. Mutabaruka is one of those who was deeply stirred by the movement and also felt obliged to advance the same. Melane Otto is of the opinion that Brathwaite's as well Mutabaruka's notion of 'nation language' have been 'influenced by this orientation'. (98)

I have tried say in this paper that Mutabaruka uses poetry as an instrument of social change. That a writer should be alive to the society he lives in has been boldly stated by Achebe in his essay 'The Novelist as Teacher' (1965). Achebe writes -

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration .  
 . . Perhaps what I write is applied are as distinct from pure art. (www3.dbu.edu)

In his introduction to *The Next Poems* of Mutabaruka, Mervyn Morris says that Mutabaruka uses poetry as a means of motivating actions. Like Achebe he questions the word 'universal' and goes back to his Pre-colonial African roots to search for identity lost in the quagmire of colonial history and craves for liberation. Muta writes:

dis poem shall speak of time  
 time unlimited time undefined  
 dis poem shall call names  
 names like lumumbakenyattankrumah  
 hannibalakenatonmalcolmgarvey

haileselassie  
 dis poem is vexed about apartheid racism facism  
 theklukluxklan riots in brixtonatlanta  
 jim jones

(‘Dis Poem’ Ll. 7-15)

It is reminiscent of Achebe and Ngugi in Nigeria. Achebe stressed the need of some kind of commitment, protest and message. We need to give an apposite answer to a section of people who thought that the black people had no past. Ngugi thought that “violence to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery: it purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unjust, oppressive social order is criminal, and diminishes man” (Ngugi qtd. in Reddy 17)

In another poem Mutabaruka writes –

I write a poem  
 And feel  
 That my poem can create  
 Can awaken  
 Change

(‘The Change’)

He protests against poverty, inequality, racism, class prejudice, oppression, cowardice, political deceit, wickedness of the powerful nations with a view to effecting a desired change. “The world needs rearranging” says Mutabaruka. He thinks that socio-economic deprivation stems from imperialism, neo-colonialism and the miseducation and exploitation of the blacks. The title of the poem (‘The change’) reminds us of an important debate in the third world countries between the status-quoists and anti status-quoists. Mutabaruka is in favour of the pro-changers.

It has already been said in this paper that orality, one of the important aspects of post-modern thinking, is central to Mutabaruka’s art. In ‘Dis Poem Lyric’ Mutabaruka writes-

dis poem has no poet  
 dis poem is just a part of the story  
 his-story her-story our story the story still untold

(‘Dis Poem ’ Ll. 42- 44)

He is swayed by a sense of the importance of African-Caribbean oral art as the indigenous equal of European literary tradition. Very subtle attempts were made by western critics to keep the oral traditions confined to “Anthropological discourse” and to label them as ‘primitive’ and ‘traditional’. Some of them said that ‘oral literature’ is a contradictory term

and so on. However, like many other countries, West Indies had a very rich store-house of folk culture and oral traditions which could be traced back to African roots. Timothy Findley in her book *Not Wanted on the Voyage* has discussed how labelling the indigenous folk culture as “inferior” has been persistent western practices to colonialism and imperialism. Seizure and control of the ‘word’ (means of interpretation and communication) was crucial to empire. In West Indies the colonizers established their culture suppressing and annihilating African–Caribbean oral practices. The colonizers systematically glorified their literature and culture and dwarfed the culture of the colonized. This aspect of colonization has been described by Spivak as “Othering”. One of the aims of post-modern and post-colonial literature has been to write back and revive that endangered folk element in various ways. It has been aptly described by Mazrui as an attempt ‘to forge a connection with the indigenous’ folk elements. (books.google.co.in)

Mutabaruka used his poetry as an instrument to bring back the lost vigour of West Indian poetry by reviving orality. Mutabaruka adopted communal form of expression and changed the syntax of poetry, and Bill Ashcroft in his book *The Empire Writes Back* has pointed out how the Anglophone writers denied accepting the European preoccupation with the individual experience and stressed communal expression. Mutabaruka’s poetry is frankly communal and highly functional. Perhaps he feels, like Achebe, that “Art for art’s sake is just another piece of deodorized dog-shit” (Achebe qtd. in Reddy 18). He is in relentless quest for building a ‘home’ for the black community who had to grow against the gory background of European imperialism.

He has made conscious effort at “dissimilation from the English standards of meter and rhythm” (Bhattacharya xxv). He made orchestrated attempts to change the language and syntax of the rulers by those of the mass. He uses dialect of the black people as a means of repossessing identity. In his introduction to *The First Poems*, Marvin Moris says that “like Louise Bennett and like many of the Black Americans of the sixties, the new and popular Jamaican poets write mainly in the unofficial language of the people” (Moris, web). Loyal to the spirit of Oral traditions Mutabaruka composed performative poetry. He performed many of his poems with or without musical instrument. In a typical performance he does not merely read or recite a set of poems. He talks towards the poems, around the poems, sometimes even instead of the poems. To Mutabaruka reading is ‘reasoning’. His poems are fully realized only in performance. He is more a performance artist than a poet who improvises at the time of performance. He has formed a band of his own named *High Times Players* and attacks colonial discourse, deconstructs it and exposes the imperialistic designs. For example, in the poem ‘The Change’ which belongs to the collection entitled *The First Poems*, Mutabaruka writes –

Yesterday  
 God was  
 White  
 Good was white  
 So  
 White was right

Yesterday  
 Evil was  
 Black  
 So  
 I took stock  
 Today,  
 I changed

(‘The Change’)

The poem is marked by a rejection of anything European and identification with everything black. His is the poetry of protest against such humiliating statements as “darkness is not a subject of history” (Roper qtd. in Reddy 9). It is evident from Mutabaruka’s poems that he could not forget “the Atlantic slave trade, which engendered the forced migration of millions of African people to the Americas as captives of Europeans; or the system of indentured labour which brought south and east Asian people to the Caribbean; or the genocidal annihilation of indigenous people in North and South America, the Caribbean...” (McLeod). Poems dealing with such a theme run the risk of being too simplistic and restrictive to represent the multicultural reality of the Caribbean life. But Mutabaruka’s authentic voice and his deft use of the oral resources save the poems from being merely protest poems.

A very special feature of his poems is that they usually rhyme and are rhythmically emphatic. Frequent use of rhetorical repetition is the hall-mark of his style. For example, in the poem ‘Thievin Legacy’ he writes –

gimme mi dis  
 gimme mi dat  
 gimme back mi everything yu got

(‘Thieving Legacy’)

In ‘The Eyes of Liberty’ he writes –

U invade          grenada  
 U invade          nicaragua  
 U bomb            hiroshima  
 U    bomb philadelphia

(‘The Eyes of Liberty’)

Caribbean literature has a long oral tradition which has been greatly influenced by the African form of song “brought to the Caribbean by the slave songs” (Otto 104). Musical forms like reggae and calypso are the direct descendants of these early African oral traditions. Melane Otto says that these musical forms were heavily influenced by the Rastafarian celebration of Africa as the Promised Land. Mutabaruka advanced the work begun in the

early decades of the twentieth century by Claude McKay and later by the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett. McKay brought patois or vernacular element into the literary traditions prior to his emigration to the USA and Jamaica-born Bennett captured the everyday speech of the Jamaicans in her poetry.

Coming to the question of Mutabaruka's attitude to women, I would like to say that Mutabaruka differs from the Rastafarian hardliners. One unfortunate part of Rastafarian way is their negative attitude towards women. Most Rastas believe that women are not – and can never be – equal to men. They believe that a good woman will always respect and obey man. This is very contrary to much of their other beliefs about people being equal. Rasta men often beat their wives for being lazy. Rasta men believe that being naked is good because one is closer to god in one's natural state. However, Rastas believe that women should not show off their bodies. Rasta men often have many different partners, while it is wrong for Rasta women to give more than a handshake to more than one man. This is the extreme stand taken by the Rastas of Jamaica or Ethiopia. But the Rastas of Texas take a more moderate stand. In Texas Rasta women are part of the Ganja smoking rituals and are not forced to stay at home like many other Rasta women throughout the world.

It seems to me that Mutabaruka's attitude to women stands somewhere in between these two attitudes. In one of his interviews Mutabaruka supports polygamy. "Man is by nature polygamous" says Mutabaruka. "I don't think the people in the east who practice polygamy see it as disrespect. The first wife is the one who decides the second wife, so the first wife is not exempt from the acceptance of a next woman in the family." But this is one side of his thought. His poems reveal a different attitude towards women. 'Sistas Poem' is a case in point. Muta writes in the poem –

Male an' female he made us all  
To gedda we stan' men shall fall  
De burden of life all mus wear  
De joy of life all mus share

('Sistas Poem' Ll. 23-26)

He wants men and women to share the joys of life equally. Men and women deserve equal and just rights, treatment and respect. It is reminiscent of a collective neuter term used by some Jamaicans. The term is 'idern' which includes both 'bredren' and 'sistren'. In the same poem Muta launches attack against the male mentality to dominate. Muta says –

Yes a feel yuh pain  
Is a shame  
Sistas a feel yuh pain  
Some men is to blame

('Sistas Poem' Ll. 8-11)

Perhaps Mutabaruka wanted to see a change in our attitude towards women. The following lines reveal Mutabaruka's love and respect for women –

Sistassistas 'ave no fear  
 Some awe breddas really do care  
 To move forward yuhafiandastan  
 In disyahammagiddion u afistan' stran

(‘Sistas Poem’ Ll. 31-34)

I would like to conclude with Mutabaruka’s attitude to nature and environment. Muta has written poems in defense of the environment. Muta’s attitude to nature and environment has been influenced to a great extent by the *Rastafarian* attitude. *Rastafarianism* is anti-capitalist. That does not mean that *Rastas* would approve communism. To the *Rastas* communism is also structured and institutionalized. However, what the *Rastas* question is the much-hyped capitalist slogan of ‘progress’ and advancement of civilization at the cost of nature and loss of agrarian base. FekadeAzeze in his book *Unheard Voices: Drought, Famine and God in Ethiopian Oral poetry* has stressed the role of oral literature in creating, nurturing and nourishing the taboos that protect the environment from human abuse or avert any reckless act that harm environmental sustainability and bring destruction and human catastrophe. *Rastas* prefer to live on what they can grow in the field and survive by vending those things. Their staple crops are maize, beans, potatoes, wheat, barley, injera (a local grain used in traditional Ethiopian bread). The *Rasta* houses are made out of mud, straw, clay and loose concrete mix. None of the houses are more than one story. This is because the *Rastas* believe that sky-scrappers invade God’s area. Even the walls of the houses are also very porous because they believe that the air inside should have a vital connection with the environment outside. Thus living in harmony with the environment and the laws of nature is one of the central ideas of *Rastafarianism*. *Rasta* attitude to nature has much in common with the attitude of the African religions which are still practiced in Jamaica and also with Hinduism. The *Rastafarians* reject the Western cultural norms which, to a great extent, support capitalism and environmental destruction. They stress the co-relation between man and nature and believe in the centrality of nature. Thus *Rasta* ideal which is environmentally sound, is something that runs parallel to the ideas of environment popularized by Cheryl Glotfelty, Harol Fromm and other eco-thinkers of the U.S.A. Muta’s ‘Ecology-Poem’ is not simply a nature poem, rather it speaks for nature. Sometimes he protests against the indiscriminate denudation of trees –

Cuttn’ down de tree  
 No baver to stop de smoke  
 Chokin’ our lives to deathwi fret

(‘Ecology-Poem’ Ll. 2-4)

He is very conscious of what is happening in the Ozone layer –

Ozone depletion  
 No discretion  
 Soon mutation

Man pollution  
 Man destruction  
 When will we see  
 That fantasy is not reality

(‘Ecology-Poem’ Ll.14-20)

He is very concerned about water-pollution :

Take a look at you and me  
 Check what is done to de sea  
 Fishes cannot breathe on lan’  
 Talking about mutation de forest  
 De birds animals too  
 Tell me what are supposed to do

(‘Ecology-Poem’ Ll. 26-34)

The following exhortation of Mutabaruka should be remembered by posterity –

Wake up to dis gift around  
 Listen to de Soun’  
 Of the earth the trees the sky  
 Den tell me why must we die

.....

Tell me why must we die usin’ vanity  
 Trying to save humanity  
 With your insanity

Mixin fantasy with reality

Tell me why

(‘Ecology-Poem’ Ll. 38-48)

Mutabaruka is angry at the insatiable greed for power, pleasure and profit. He is up in arms against the “manipulations and machinations in power-equations”. (Reddy 17)

To conclude, the relevance of Mutabaruka in the context of Caribbean poetry is that his poetry is embedded in the West Indians’ eternal quest for communal identity. Mutabaruka’s distinctive contribution is that he has contextualized and redefined orality in poetry and has made us feel that oral poetry is not a thing of the remote past and is long lost. He has effectively used orality among literate and non-literate people to launch his protest against discrimination in society. He is more a musician poet than a poet of the spoken word.

He is one of those who contributed to the rise of the twin phenomenon of the Calypso and Reggae in Jamaica. Mutabaruka's originality, preoccupation with the folk elements, with orality, with social protest, with the assertion of his black identity and his off-beat form of expression sometimes tend to dissociate him from the main-stream orthodox Caribbean poetry. But in his departure from Euro-centric discourse, in his questioning of the centrality of British metropolitan culture, in his deviations from standard English and in his frank oppositional voice, Mutabaruka belongs to the line of Benjamin Zephaniah, Linton Johnson, Michael Smith, Jean Binta Breeze, Brathwaite, Louise Bennett and others who, unlike Walcott who put emphasis upon mixed multicultural heritage, have stressed the importance of African legacy. Brathwaite regards a return to African roots as crucial to contemporary West Indian identity while Walcott supports cultural syncretism which, while not denying ancestral affiliations, sees Afro-Caribbean destiny as inescapably enmeshed in multi-cultural reality. Mutabaruka, who will be remembered for the infusion of folk and oral elements into Caribbean poetry, seems to belong to the line of Brathwaite.

\* Web links for text of the poems -

[http://www.lyricsfreak.com/m/mutabaruka/dis+poem\\_20730215.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/m/mutabaruka/dis+poem_20730215.html)  
<http://www.mutabaruka.com/books.htm>  
<http://www.jah-lyrics.com/index.php?songid=5583>

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