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An Aesthetics of Realism: The Image of Postcolonial Africa in Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road*

The primary focus of this paper is to uncover the manner in which social and economic realities in the real world of postcolonial Kenya come to be represented in Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road*¹ and, consequently, to (re)locate the text within its historical and ideological context. The paper sees the novel as a highly utilitarian art that dwells on the socio-economic realities of its enabling milieu, the realities that “no East African novelist has been able to ignore.”² In the novel, Mwangi's ideological persuasion tilts in favour of the pauperised and disempowered masses of the post-independence Kenyan nation in particular and the African continent in general. In fact, the major artistic ideology of Mwangi is an attack on social injustice in all its forms. However, the paper argues further that Mwangi fails to point the way to improve the lot of the Kenyan masses under the iron grip of the present-day alliance of the indigenous “nouveaux riches” in Kenya and the ruling class (politicians and the military) who have inflicted social and economic hardship on the impoverished masses. He is too prone to the “reflectionist perspective of fiction.”³ Mwangi, in the novel, only confirms the neo-

colonial betrayal in his nation; he does not attempt to problematise it. The analysis of the plot, characterisation, use of language, tone, humour and setting of the novel reveals that it is an implicit endorsement of the established order it seeks to query. This ideological ambiguity in Mwangi's novel is critically explored in this paper. The uncritical treatment of everyday reality in the novel may be mediated by various ideological and political factors, but we hasten to assert that the search for authenticity of representation in Mwangi's novel is doomed to failure. This is because the mode of representation employed in the text is not enabling and empowering.

A study of any writer may tend to be defective if an attempt is not made to locate his/her major thematic concerns within the totality of the history of his society. This is more pertinent when a discussion of an African writer is embarked upon. Historically, Africa has passed through the stages of the slave trade, colonialism, independence and neo-colonialism. These have provided immense possibilities of themes and visions for African writers. The themes range from the romantic temper of negritude to the critical pessimism and social realism of the present. African literature and African history are thus like Siamese twins. The historical phases of the African continent can also be described as representing the moods that African literature has undergone. The pre-colonial period typified a "paradise on earth," an idyllic stage. The colonial period was that of "paradise disturbed," that is, a period of optimism for a "better tomorrow." However, the postcolonial/neo-colonial phase suggests a mood of "paradise lost," a period when African writers have become more realistic than ever before. The writers now examine critically how Africans have been governing themselves and what they have made of their independence.

Kenya achieved her independence in December 1963. But how far have the people, the masses, the freedom fighters, benefitted from the flag independence? Unfortunately, the hard-won independence in Kenya, as in many other neo-colonial African countries, does not make the lives of the peasants better. Neo-colonialism, in Kenya, is a form of imperialism through the agency of the new comprador bourgeoisie, the new ruling elite who have dashed the emancipatory promise of nationalist struggle. The leaders promised the masses political liberty and national dignity, but they have failed to concretise the gains of independence. The heroes of the Mau Mau revolt are now casualties; they are the debris of society—men with a brave past and no future.⁴ The neo-colonial leaders have been aggravating the conditions of the masses by alienating them and by turning vicious and dictatorial. The postcolonial Kenyan writers regularly turn to this “neo-colonial” problem as a quarry for their thematic focus. They respond to the disappointment bitterly and strive for authenticity and legitimacy by identifying with their society.

In the various periods of African literature, socio-historical and political realities are foregrounded in literary texts through the employment of certain images and metaphors. In fact, African literature has an enduring propensity for socio-political commitment. Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1981) comments brilliantly on the interface of literature and life in Africa. To him, and many other critics, literature, in general, and African literature, in particular, does not usually belong to surreal, metaphysical or ethereal worlds; rather it is always a reflection of social reality. In Ngugi’s words:

Literature results from conscious acts of men in society. At the level of the individual artist, the very act of writing implies a social relationship: one is writing about somebody for somebody. At the collective level, literature, as a product of men’s intellectual and imaginative activity embodies, in words and

images, the tensions, conflicts, contradictions, at the heart of a community's being and process of becoming. It is a reflection on the aesthetic and imaginative planes, of a community's wrestling with its total environment to produce the basic means of life, food, clothing, shelter, and in the process creating and recreating itself in history.⁵

However, African literature is never a mechanistic reflection of reality, because it both reflects reality and attempts to persuade the reader/audience to form an attitude to the reality portrayed. In line with the above postulation of Ngugi, African literature engages in imaginative presentations of the woes and vicissitudes of the lives of the pauperised masses. More often than not, the postcolonial African writers portray the ordeals of the ordinary citizens of their societies who wallow in abject poverty and tattered penury. They always show their anger at the venality and ineptitude of the majority of post-independence African leaders and make their preoccupation with the plight of post-independence Africa explicit in their texts.

The theme of postcolonial betrayal is a common motif in contemporary African literature. The writers imaginatively chronicle numerous abuses to which the African masses have been subjected. To a great extent, the postcolonial African writers prioritise dystopian fiction. They depict their continent as a society characterised by human misery, such as squalor, oppression, diseases and overcrowding. In fact, the writers have a sensitive perception of a world of desolation, alienation, hopelessness, insecurity and the like. This is a worthwhile venture because creative writing can serve as a form of therapy against the frustration of living in our troubled neo-colonial societies. So much has happened and is still happening in postcolonial Africa of a terrifying and tragic nature, and writers have made their influence felt. At times, they pay for their loyalty to their vocation with mental and physical agony. This is revealed in the incarceration of many

African writers, the judicial murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 and the enforced exile of some of them.

Meja Mwangi was born in 1948 at Nanyuki, Kenya. He studied up to A-Level at Kenyatta College. His formal training in writing at the University of Leeds in 1981 contributed to his maturity as a writer. His work as a journalist, film director and sound technician accounts for the journalistic and photographic style of his writings. Among his novels are the following: *Kill Me Quick* (1973), *Carcase for Hounds* (1974), *Going Down River Road* (1976), *The Cockroach Dance* (1979), *Bread of Sorrow* (1987), *Weapon of Hunger* (1989) and *The Last Plague* (2000). Despite the hostility of the ruling class towards the writers in his society, Mwangi still writes novels that chronicle neo-colonial social injustice in all its forms. He depicts the lot of the Kenyan masses under the iron grip of the present-day alliance of the indigenous *nouveaux riches* in Kenya. Critical opinion shows that Mwangi has succeeded in focusing his creative attention on essential societal issues—injustice, hunger, oppression, exploitation and harrowing poverty. However, since the eighties, Mwangi has made a decisive shift of thematic concern from life in Kenyan city slums to more universal issues. This is due to his present ideological posture that Kenyan destiny has a definite link with the rest of the world. Therefore, he is now preoccupied with universal themes in a fresh novelistic style. He is now receiving more critical attention, and his fiction has emerged on the world literary scene as a fresh and vibrant new element. For instance, he has been awarded various prizes including the Jomo Kenyatta Prize, the German Youth Book Prize and the Adolf Grimme Prize. Many of his novels have now been translated: into German, for instance, *Nairobi*, *River Road*; *Mr. Rivers Last Solo*; *Kariuki* and *Scars of the Sky*.

The fictional cosmos of *Going Down River Road* is unmistakably the here-and-now material world of neo-colonial/postcolonial Kenya. It is a poignant tale of oppression and human degradation, specifically, in the mid-1970s in Kenya which was one of the worst periods of economic, social and cultural dislocation in the nation. That period was marked and marred by unsavoury political and social events. The novel plays out the neo-colonial woes, that is, the crisis of a nation under neo-colonial oppression as the lived experiences of the characters. It takes as its subject some of the most downtrodden, oppressed and exploited people in Kenyan society. The most tragic and poignant moments in the novel are those that deal with the plight of the casual labourers in Kenya, most especially Ben and Ocholla, a few among the millions of the masses suffering the agonies of neo-colonial African rulers. Through these characters, Mwangi presents his readers with a snapshot of a nation whose masses are in woe. What unites the different characters in the novel is not only their oppression, but also their geographical and cultural displacement.⁶ For instance, Ben and Ocholla come to represent the thousands of internally displaced youths who flee their villages in search of a better life in the cities, only to live out their lives in the wretchedness of urban slums. Indeed, Mwangi, in this novel, has a vision of life as hell. This is why the characters are mostly trapped in the hell and are unable to escape from it. Thus, despite its devastating critique of the neo-colonial betrayal, *Going Down River Road* presents a static view of postcolonial African society.

Set in Nairobi, Kenya, the novel is a harshly realistic novel. Mwangi gives a vivid portrayal of Nairobi's marginal spaces and the people who inhabit them. The peripheral areas of Nairobi such as Eastleigh and Mathare Valley that house the disenfranchised, the

destitute population, the impoverished residents and the powerless are the central focus of the story. The city of Nairobi is used as the crucial locus of social tensions. In the novel, Mwangi piles up sign after sign and uses them to show the worsening conditions of the peasants in a neo-colonial African urban dwelling. The signs in the novel foreground a picture of exploitation where the dominant and the powerful oppress the downtrodden masses.

Actually, signs are used in the novel as a mimesis of social dissonance, characteristic of the lives of the neo-colonial African masses. The signs also capture moments of aborted hopes and dashed aspirations in society where the optimism of the youths perishes before maturity, and growth is stunted. The indices of frustration and anguish are vividly evoked to present the hostility of nature elements as they reveal the imminence of untimely death. Unfortunately, the sordid experiences demonstrated in Mwangi's novel are merely an accurate reflection of the realities of post-independent African nations. The characters show at various times in the development of the plot their wish to escape or avoid the prolongation of their sufferings. From the beginning to the end of the story, they engage in finding ways of escape from their excruciating pains. Ben, Ocholla, Onesmus, Wini and other characters fight an existential and societal war of surviving and escaping their disenchanting world but end up staggering "faster down the deserted River Road." It is our belief that Mwangi's realism is weak because of his ultimately romantic portrayal of poverty and oppression and of the disempowering of his characters.

Reading the novel as a psychological work of art, this paper considers the determinist theory of environment and its impact on human behaviour. The negative

metamorphosis of the characters in the novel is thus linked to the spatio-temporal texture of the novel. By means of an extensive exploration of the individual and collective experience of the characters, as well as the analysis of their different socio-cultural backgrounds, Mwangi has been able to highlight the thorny issues of social problems that have plagued postcolonial Kenya. Therefore, the spatial setting of the novel is used as thematic vehicle—an index of death, destitution, decay, hollowness and brokenness which dot the urban society portrayed in the text.

Although Leonard Kibera and Charles Mangua had individually written about the urban setting in Kenya before Mwangi, Mwangi's is paradigmatic. It offers the most interesting example of the urban genre from Kenya. In the novel, setting is used symbolically as an index of social stratification. It is shown that a constant struggle for survival marks life in Nairobi's poorest sectors. The Nairobi city is used in the novel as the setting of significant actions, events and dialogues. Through the use of setting as tone, Mwangi is able to probe the problem and pain of existence in the modern-day Kenya or Africa as a whole. It foregrounds the craving of man, in the face of difficulties, to exist. The story captures the seamy side of the city of Nairobi and captures the characters (who represent the modern African masses) at a very difficult time of their existence, tracing them to their doom and total frustration. This is premised on the ideological tendency of Mwangi, the ultra-naturalist, to see death or resignation as the final point of reference for life, all actions and thoughts in neo-colonial African milieus. Mwangi portrays the neo-colonial African world as a place where human beings are just shadowy actors on the stage waiting for death.

Told almost entirely from the point of view of the neo-colonial Kenyan masses, the labourers, the novel is firmly grounded both in its narrative voice and in its sense of time and place, as it grimly captures the despair of this class of people during the neo-colonial period in Africa. Characters are also used symbolically, serving as indices and thematic vehicles of the stories. We see a close relationship between the characters and their immediate physical and social environment. They are stock characters, mostly unthinking labourers unconcerned by their status as long as they have a chain of women and illicit drinks. They reflect the alienation and individualism most obvious in postcolonial urban Kenya. The characters are casual site workers toiling from dawn to dusk and receiving a pittance in return.

The brand of realism employed by Mwangi in the novel involves faithful representation of archetypal characters in typical situations. The sociological approach in literary valuation suggests, among many others, that characters should be typical, that is, representing a class; for example the insensitive bourgeois class, the oppressed downtrodden masses and the agents of the state. The characters are inseparably linked with the spatio-temporal texture of the novels. It is in its characterisation that the tone of Mwangi's novel is most manifest. The totalising effects of character, however, cannot be satisfactorily arrived at without considering setting and language, in line with structuralism's idea of subjectivity.⁷ Gestures of the characters, their gazes, suspense, repetitions, cadences of voices and textual silences are marshalled to express the acute pangs of suffering and their disastrous effects on human souls. For instance, Ocholla and Ben in the novel signify the multitudes of problems facing the peasants in neo-colonial African societies. These include unemployment or underemployment, poverty, illiteracy,

hunger, brutalisation, etc. However, the exposé does not go beyond the superficial level as it only gives an exploration of the individual agony and dilemma. The story is a portrayal merely of cynicism and despair.

Looking down on Africa from a plane, Mwangi perceives neo-colonial Kenya as a hall of reflecting mirrors, therefore visualising it from a perspective that would make his world appear very ridiculous and absurd. Characters from such a vision are bound to be tragi-comic, mechanically actuated marionettes. There is no subtlety of characterisation and motivation as the novelist uses the characters as aspects of his uncritical inquiry into the nature of the neo-colonial Kenyan masses. To adapt the words of Martin Esslin, in such a vision, reality is seen “through the eyes of a dead man who looks back at life.”⁸ The world of the characters only shapes them; they do not shape it at all. What is portrayed is an aimless drifting and solitariness of man, demonstrated in the characters’ inability to resist the oppression from the neo-colonial rulers. They are shown as self-consolidating others and disarticulated masses. The story shows the neo-colonial African man as an archetypal everyman enmeshed in an endless and futile struggle for recognition, power or even personal glory. In Mwangi’s fictional world, man is a victim of his society; he can hardly do anything to change his fate within it. We believe that there is a sense of morbidity in a vision that celebrates individual agony and nausea. Actually, we make bold to assert that a work of art that shows no constant and progressive interaction between man and his world is uneven.

Mwangi’s created beings lack socio-political understanding. But one expects him to provide the reader with the insight lacked by the fictional characters. In fact, his novel fails to shine a light upon darkness; it merely becomes a part of the darkness it discusses.

The idea of sheer realism is one of the fundamental philosophical and ideological flaws of the novel. What Mwangi does is just to present the suffering, the pain of existence of some typical Kenyan masses and show the reader how the characters at different stages of their lives react to their agonies as human beings. The characters move about not so much oblivious of politics but quite unable to think politically; they are bereft of any sense of political agency. Workers are depicted as ignorant fools, and the informed ones among them, like Machore, are construed as irrelevant and unserious. Actually, Machore is like one of the inmates of Plato's cave who at last manages to turn and get a glimpse of the light outside the cave. When he turns back and tries to tell the other inmates about what he has seen outside, they respond by saying that his long absence has made him mad.

The reaction of the labourers to the daily Machore assembly at the construction site betrays the political ideology of the novelist. The narration does not rise beyond the "unconcerned" consciousness of the characters with whom the narration, the narrator and deductively the novelist merely empathise. Machore is never shown to be convincing. The reader is told that his colleagues only listen to him to while away the break time: "The truth of the labourers' conference is that none believes in it."⁹ The characters, the neo-colonial African masses, are quite unable to make sense of the political decisions responsible for their condition. The meetings are presented as directionless and are for theatrics alone. No agenda is ever prepared. This preoccupation with the naturalistic presentation of woes may be informed by Mwangi's predilection for avoiding overt political statements. It confirms his tragic vision of life. He just delineates the problems of the society in terms of the corruption and insensitivity of individual rulers on the one hand and the helplessness of the ruled on the other. Both sides of the divide in the society

are equally castigated. Since in his political stance, Mwangi inadvertently authenticates the status quo ante in his society, he is prone to mere naturalistic depiction of the woes of the masses in neo-colonial Kenya.

Existence, for the masses, in postcolonial Kenya is portrayed in Mwangi's novel as an immense stretch of pains with occasional flashes of joy. So utterly angry about the wrongs and injustices done to the masses in his nation, Mwangi portrays nothing in his novel but squalor and wretchedness. Life for the common people is shown to be worse than during colonialism. This is reflected vividly in the habitation of the characters who are archetypes of the neo-colonial masses in Kenya and African countries. Most of them come to the city to look for better prospects, only to realise that things are different. The masses in the novel live in wretched makeshift shelters that are prevalent in Majengo. When it rains, the roofs and walls leak, and there is no difference between being outside in the downpour and being in the cold, wet house. Tortured by the reality of their sordid lives, it is no wonder that most of the site workers, the hands, in the novel frequently express a fervent desire to go back to their villages. But the harsh fact is that without an alternative, they have no choice but to continue to stay in the city of Nairobi. Worse still, the society is inundated with the ubiquitous presence of police and military men to instil fear into the citizens. This overwhelming military might in the society has greatly affected the psychic health of the people. The forces of oppression and exploitation have succeeded in neutralising those of struggle and liberation. The masses therefore decide to turn their anger outward by channelling their frustration into equally self-destructive acts of uncontrollable drinking and sex.

Actually, alcohol is depicted in the novel to be a boon to the neo-colonial regime in the nation. It is a distracting and befuddling beverage for people who would otherwise have been fomenting trouble for the government. This is why the neo-colonial rulers are very tolerant of the production, sale and consumption of local illicit gins. In the neo-colonial Kenyan milieu, the craze is alcohol. To a great extent, partaking of alcohol has become almost a national pastime. Many Kenyans have been driven to heavy drinking by the problems of galloping inflation, weak currency and low per capita income in their nation. It is revealed that Ben and Ocholla bury their sorrow in unhygienic drinks at Karara Centre, Capricorn, Treebottom and Sukuma Wiki. They drink beer only at the end of the month when they receive their very low wages. But more often than not, the Kenyan masses, as revealed in *Going Down River Road*, go for illegally brewed and often poisonous liquor that maims and kills thousands each year. This fad for poisonous alcoholic drinks is dictated by the economic status of the people who are too poor to afford conventional legal beer.

Another problem of postcolonial betrayal in African nations that finds expression in Mwangi's novel is the insatiable quest for wealth by the indigenous rulers. The masses have become poorer and poorer, because they have no opportunity for competition with the rich. Independence in most African nations brought with it an increase in the status and wealth of politicians and government officials and a corresponding decrease in those of the masses.¹⁰ Therefore, the subject matter of Mwangi's novel is the presence of such vices as these and the absence of the traditional virtues of socialism which the African past was known for. To a great extent, social inequality is one of the problems handled by Mwangi in his *Going Down River Road*. The idea of survival of the fittest propounded by

Charles Darwin finds expression in the novel. As a realistic fiction that draws a graphic picture of an urban setting in an African neo-colonial nation, the novel foregrounds the ills of social disparities in postcolonial Kenya. These include corrupt employment processes, the insensate dispensation of justice by the arms of the state charged with such a responsibility, the deplorable social services, the impudent use of sex to make money and sexual harassment. The relationship between the two classes of people in the world of the novel is, on the whole, not a harmonious or healthy one because class distinction and consequently class dissonance mostly characterise it. Mwangi paints a depressing picture of the condition of the poor masses in the society and subtly hints at their being victims of an unjust social system. Eustace Palmer has identified this fundamental ideological thrust of Mwangi's fiction:

A touching compassion for the social or political underdog, quietness of tone which emphasizes rather than obscures the very serious problems being analysed, and a remarkably controlled though unpretentious prose style.¹¹

Palmer's postulation is quite informative because, actually, the story is a recreation of landscapes of stinking back alleys and ramshackle dwellings with the severe problems that accompany them. The neo-colonial rulers have, by their grasping tendencies, upset the socio-economic equilibrium of the society so much that the gap between the rich and the poor appears unbridgeable. The neo-colonial African masses portrayed in the novel suffer from the problem of alienation. They are shown to be passive receivers of all forms of harsh stimuli from the society. They live in a near sub-human situation in which they comprehend nobody, not even themselves. They are so estranged from themselves and their society that they do not care to bother about who they are and what the world looks like. Ben, Ocholla and other hands are converted to a mindless appendage of machinery

with all their manly faculties crippled by the society. This confirms Alan Swingewood's argument that capitalism engenders a "denial of man's potentiality for creative intelligence and the building of a truly humane society."¹²

It is pertinent at this juncture to reiterate the overriding thesis of this paper that human existence in neo-colonial Kenyan society is portrayed by Mwangi in a somewhat commonplace and mundane manner. It does not reach below the veneer of primary sensory perceptions. The masses in the society submit themselves to the exclusive destiny proposed by God. They appear bewildered by events in their society and resigned to their fate; they do not attempt to alter their world. The working people are presented as passive and dormant. There is not a single occasion when they protest about their living conditions. They do not struggle to liberate themselves. They are presented as an amorphous mass belonging to a single class in society. Of course, Mwangi is correct to show vividly how the neo-colonial rulers oppress this class, but he gives the readers the impression that the working people are lacking in any spirit of rebellion. This is a serious and unacceptable amputation of historical reality. Art should be able to portray the potential of people, that is, their ability to resist oppression and subjugation.

The social structure that evolved in Kenya during colonial times emphasised race and class. The dominance of whites over blacks was reinforced through segregation of the races and, within the black African population, of the various ethnic groups. Within each ethnic group, status was determined largely by wealth. However, in post-independence Kenyan society, race has ceased to be an important indicator of social status, but wealth and ethnic identity remain significant. In fact, today, most of Kenya's problems result from disparities in wealth. These problems include inadequate housing,

inadequate jobs, lack of waste-removal services, corrupt officials, alcoholism, thievery, juvenile delinquency and the like. Mwangi's *Going Down River Road*, in the main, is replete with vivid narration of the problems arising from the lack of social cohesion in Kenyan/African society. In the novel, he reflects on the industrial labour sector and how it is subjected to relative deprivation, exploitation and the theft of the individual's humanity.

The situation of the masses in the world of the novel is caused by the society they live in. A society where many able-bodied youths are without jobs, where many find it difficult to live well, will certainly breed robbers who in one way or the other will influence some other people who are well placed. The state of disorder and chaos in this environment is evident in the presence of Max and his gangster, the noise of their radiogram and the tenants' constant harassment by the exploitative landlord. Max and his cohorts are shown as an irresponsible lot who care little about others, and they are depicted as die-hard drug addicts. A more disturbing presence in this society is that of the real criminals especially the armed robbers. Ben is in fact robbed on one occasion and a number of armed robbery cases are reported. Unfortunately, Mwangi is too loyal to the primary data he reflects. Helplessness, despair and ignorance are added to the surface level depiction. However, a work of art need not be a mere photographic reproduction of everything that has gone on in society. He has only succeeded in creating a pattern of alienation. He does not seem to grasp the crosscurrents underlying the neo-colonial woes he has tried to highlight sympathetically in the novel. For instance, whenever fundamental issues like the betrayal of the masses by the politicians, most especially the Members of Parliament, are introduced by Mwangi in the novel, the narrator sends in a

tribal defender for the named M.P. One of the problems militating against any meaningful agitation for good governance in postcolonial Kenya is ethnicity. Although the masses of the nation suffer at the hands of their rulers, ethnicity consciousness does not allow them to band together to fight for their rights. Thus, the rulers are able to perpetuate their misgovernance and the misery of the masses deepens unabated.

Although Kenya and other African nations are now independent, politically speaking, not much has changed because colonial economic structures are still in place all over the countries, controlling key economic sectors. For instance, the capitalist employers of the Construction Firm, Patel and Chakur Contractors, are Indians who are noted for the meagre wages they pay their employees. However, in this society, the Indians are not depicted as totally superior to the black Africans, rather, they are portrayed as necessary second-class citizens; they are part of the oppressed of the Empire. They are no better than their African counterparts. The job at the site is tasking, tedious and energy sapping. The workers can be sacked at will; they die unmourned. For example, Onesmus's death is taken rather too casually: "When scum like Onesmus die, they are quickly forgotten."¹³ This suggests an atmosphere of insecurity which constantly surrounds a nation marked by social and political inequalities. This is the situation in most postcolonial African nations where able-bodied people are always subjected to casual labour and underemployment. Out of this despair comes an attempt to form human connections in an inhuman world. The force of circumstance and necessity throw the casual labourers, who are initially strangers to one another, together. The novel traces their sense of comradeship and the eventual destruction of this community in the face of the brutality of larger socio-economic forces.

The viciousness of the tyrannical neo-colonial African rulers and the unfathomable sorrow of their victims (the masses) are glaringly revealed in various forms of immoral acts the site workers are exposed to—drug trafficking (Ben and Yussuff), nepotism (in forms of promotion and favouritism), and illicit sexual relations. Again, Mwangian men do not care a hoot about anything, not even those that concern their daily existence.¹⁴ They take to excessive alcohol consumption because they seem to believe that to stay sober, one must remain permanently drunk. Since the neo-colonial Kenyans are alienated from their work, from one another, from their families and from their society generally, they take to extreme consumption of alcohol, used as an escape from their problems. It provides a respite for the labourers from their excruciating ordeals and is the only avenue for interrelationships among the poor masses.

The novel's careful attention to detail, its sensual concreteness, allows insignificant objects to acquire a density of meaning. The smells, colours, and textures of objects come to stand in for the monotonous stagnation of the lives of the people. For instance, the choice of the name "Development House" in the novel is of thematic significance. It signposts the painful reality of degeneration in the lives of the city peasants, that is, the agony of alienation suffered by the masses in the postcolonial African nation. As the house goes up, the chances of the labourers for permanent employment, promotion and increases in wages dwindle, and their destitution increases. This is ironic, because structurally, the society seems to be developing whereas the quality of existence of the masses declines: "Just as a man will turn his back to you, a building gets completed and leaves you unoccupied."¹⁵

Another logical concomitant effect of social inequality and social oppression in neo-colonial Kenyan society addressed in Mwangi's novel is that of the indifference of the rulers to the plight of their subjects. In a society where those who are better off are enthusiastically widening the gap between themselves and those less fortunate, and are oppressing these latter, social indifference is likely to become an evil all too easily practised. This vice is clearly exposed and harshly arraigned in Ben and Ocholla's ordeals and exploits. Through these, the reader witnesses the deplorable condition of the common man, the hopelessness and futility of the "hands." The centres of operations of the workers are indices of pollution and confusion. They are even treated to cacophonous and distorted music which is irritating. They also engage in rowdy talk, which signifies confusion. The streets are full of death traps and are hostile to mankind, being dimly lit. Such a society will surely breed a lot of social ills. The society portrayed in the novel is paradigmatic of other African cities like Lagos, Accra, Cairo, Dakar, Cape Town and the like. The plight of the city dwellers in the novel shows that when (African) masses' lives are confined in suffocating social spheres or their own rightful spaces are assaulted, it would be hard for such society at large and the dominating affluent citizens, particularly, to have a restful mind or maintain a spotless social order.¹⁶ Above this is Mwangi's preoccupation with the agony of the masses, represented by the workers and the harsh conditions under which they live. The people are faced with a lot of problems that lead to a lowering of their self-esteem, failure and personal limitation. They actually experience the pains of existence in the city that is hostile to the positive development of youths. To Neil McEwan, "development in Kenya has reduced Mwangi's people to an alien kind of poverty."¹⁷ The sense of despair and hopelessness, the brooding pessimism, and the

wretchedness of life under stifling oppression are too much for the masses of neo-colonial Kenya. There is little or nothing to celebrate or look forward to in the world inhabited by Mwangian men and women.

The sourness of African independence is also revealed in the disruption of the traditional moral order of the society portrayed in Mwangi's novel. Most Kenyans and Africans generally used to place great importance on the family and traditional values and responsibilities associated with them. However, another painful effect of pervasive rural and urban poverty, overcrowded and substandard housing in urban areas and a relatively high rate of unemployment on postcolonial African society is the disintegration of families. The social realities of the moment in neo-colonial African societies have brought a lot of changes to human relations in the societies. Prior to the colonial era, African villages were noted for their homogeneity and were guided by traditional beliefs and values. Members of the communities were very closely bound together, and the primacy of the community over the individual was emphasised. In the neo-colonial African society portrayed in Mwangi's novel, there is disruption of traditional structures, including family roles and gender relations. This basic unit of relationship in society is seriously and negatively affected, resulting in alienation of the labourers from their families. This psychosocial problem is a side effect of the referent society where there is "real poverty, even among those who are lucky to get jobs."¹⁸ People like Ben never get married because, with their kind of life-style and their meagre wages, they are hardly able to settle down to raise a family. A character like Ocholla who has two wives and several children cannot meet the expectations of his dependants and family. He thus abandons them in the village to seek his personal welfare, in the city, alone. He can, therefore, be

referred to as a “prodigal” father, having been away from his family for so long that he cannot even say with any certainty the number of children he has or their correct sexes.

It is pertinent to comment on the significance of Ocholla’s abandonment of his family. It is always a painful decision to abandon one’s children and spouse. However, Ocholla, being a member of the psychologically and economically strangled class, decides to leave his family in the village. This is to suppress the trouble arising from the economic circumstances of his society. In the city, he becomes a dipsomaniac, sex-maniac and vagrant. The scene of the arrival of his large family from the village captures the trauma of a dehumanised being. He sees their visit as a burden and becomes downcast as soon as he sees the worn-out and underfed children and their mothers: “His face turns a dusty grey hue, his eyes popping out.”¹⁹ In such urban societies that are plagued with social dissonance and pains, frustration is always the order of the day. For instance, the reader notices the psychological torture of Ocholla when his family arrive in the city. This is due to the economic condition of city dwellers who always live from hand to mouth. Apart from violence, sex and alcohol, nothing else in terms of interpersonal relationships or responsibilities arrests the interests of Mwangian men. The only character—Ocholla—who has some family connections is totally alienated from them, and it is only towards the end, ostensibly because of sexual desire, that he shows affection in dealing with them. He hardly discusses his marital life, except when he is drunk. With two wives at home, Ocholla still goes about visiting whores. The problem of alienation he suffers from the society is carried down to his family. To him, his children are either brats or rats and his wives bitches. This is due to the frustration caused by his society, most especially his underpaid job.

The social situation in the novel is also simply sterile. It offers no potential element of regeneration. It is a society riddled with greed, ignorance and failure from which there is no apparent way of escape. Everything is polluted, close to the edge of despair. In the world of the novel, wealth and power have become the principal pursuits; the inevitable result of the situation is a complete disregard of any moral or social considerations in the drive to satisfy individual desires. The society portrayed in the novel confirms Ernest Emenyonu's assertion that "the city is a corrupting influence."²⁰ So wicked and corrupt is the society that there is no point in the individual's trying to change it. The individual has got to learn to live in the midst of the deprivation and must try to secure his own private salvation through immoral acts and endurance. They are all immersed in a cauldron of immorality because of their attempts to keep pace with the fast life of the city. In fact, the city changes people; it lures them in and destroys them. The problem of the traumatic experience of neo-colonialism in postcolonial African societies is vividly enunciated in the scenes involving a landlord and his tenants, and the downtrodden masses and the state agents. This scene vibrantly reveals that *Going Down River Road* is a sophisticated study of the effects of social oppression, particularly an exploration of the ways class oppression brutalises and dehumanises the psyche of the oppressed. In fact, Third-World politics and economy reveal an atmosphere replete with deceit, blackmail, intimidation and corruption. The activities of the Rent Tribunal and the mode of awarding contracts are sated with official corruption and social oppression. The affluent people of the society take the law into their own hands and thereby constitute an illegal authority unto themselves. To the rich few, wealth is might and right, but poverty and joblessness are equated with criminality. Joseph Richard buttresses this view:

Today, although the continent is fully under African rule, the broader emancipatory promises of decolonization are unmet. With the fiftieth anniversary of many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa on the horizon, challenges of conflict, undermining poverty, and the destructive import of malaria, tuberculosis, AIDS and other maladies are mounting.²¹

In most African neo-colonial cities, the dreams of independence, which include self-determination, accelerated development and democratic ideals have become altogether too elusive. The masses are disillusioned by the broken promises of African independence; they feel betrayed by the postcolonial rulers. As a result of the rulers' inability to deliver the material and moral promises of independence,

[t]he giddy expectations of independence were replaced by epithets: the postcolonial leviathan was variously characterized as "crony," "collapsed," "corporatist," "ceremonial," "decadent," "non-developmental," "kleptocratic," "greedy," "hollow," "lecherous," "predatory," "prebendal," "parasitic," "precarious," "patrimonial," "neopatrimonial," "lame," "swollen," "unreal," "venal," "vampire."²²

Mwangi's condemnation of the injustices in the social and political life of post-independence Kenya also reveals that women are perhaps the greatest victims of the neo-colonial woes. They suffer from sexual discrimination and exploitation, especially when they are working class citizens. The novel is populated with women of easy virtue, whose main source of livelihood is sex. Prostitution is depicted as a way of life for young girls desirous of making money, girls who have been lured to the city by their desire to enjoy life, eat in fashionable hotels, ride in luxurious cars and have men who can take care of them as lovers. The only relatively virtuous one out of the lot is Wini, who is later artistically and morally destroyed in the course of the narrative, when she elopes with her white boss, leaving behind her son (Baby) and her partner (Ben). Wini's abandonment of Baby is a product of societal pressure. To strive for economic and social empowerment in

a society that does not cater for the masses' welfare, Wini has to combine studentship with part-time prostitution. However, as a woman, she needs social succour that she thinks she could get from Ben. But she is frustrated, since later events prove her wrong. This is because Ben, a mere city peasant, does not have the economic means to provide her with the basic necessities of life; his salary is too meagre to meet Wini's demands. The act of Wini also bears the mark of feminine radicalism (ability to choose one's fate and lover), which is one of the fundamental thrusts of the modernist novel. After many years of being used, misused, enjoyed, exploited and finally discarded by many men, after all those painful years, Wini decides to taste another life, which is perhaps more blissful and more socially respectable.

However, Mwangi's portrayal of Wini is one-sided. She is seen through Ben's viewpoint throughout the time she is presented in the novel. The reader would have loved to know the motives behind most of her actions through her own viewpoint, for example her elopement with her boss and her real motive in leaving her son behind. The reader may not be convinced that a mother so much in love with her only child would leave him behind without an attempt at explanation. Though we try to deduce the causes of her action from the general agonizing condition of the masses in neo-colonial Kenya, Mwangi would have given more force to such sympathetic consideration if he had given Wini a chance to express herself. This is a reflection of the plight of womenfolk in African societies where women are always subjugated, silenced, marginalised and objectified.

The plight of the female characters in the text is codified in "various domestic and public spatial structures, ideologies, and experiences that differently impede the women's

lives under (post)colonization, which itself is an unfinished tale of history and identity.’’²³

The foremost factor in the plight of womenfolk portrayed in the novel is that of prostitution. The reader sees various reasons why women go into prostitution in neo-colonial African nations. The commonest reason is the harsh socio-economic realities of the society. Poverty is in the first position among the realities. Hardly does any woman go into prostitution out of sheer urge for fun. It is a situation where women out of destitution unashamedly sell their bodies for money. This suggests the degree of impoverishment, the extent of post-independence betrayal, the brutalisation of the masses in neo-colonial Africa. The scene in which Susan and her friend have sex with two men in the same room whilst her one month-old baby screams in the corner aptly captures the story of cheapened sexuality in neo-colonial African societies. A famished prostitute, Susan calls on Ben to palliate her anguish of starvation in sexual bliss. This stamps on the reader’s mind the hopelessness of these women and girls in their struggle for survival. It is the height of human exploitation for monetary gain. Prostitution in Kenya and other African countries has disastrous consequences for women’s physical, psychological and social development. A number of African women, like Wini and Susan, join prostitution as a means of survival. Therefore, poverty has lent impetus to the sex trade in African nations, and despite the threat of AIDS, gonorrhoea, syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections, to some, it is the only key to a “brighter” future. In recent years in Kenya, infection with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that causes Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) has been a severe problem. In 2001 an estimated fifteen per cent of adult Kenyans were infected with HIV, one of the highest infection rates in the world. Although the text was written in 1976, before AIDS took hold, it

seems to foreshadow some contemporary national, continental and global issues, including the ravaging AIDS pandemic. Susan, one of the commercial sex workers in *Going Down River Road*, is a sixteen-year old teenager who lives in Marengo, Nairobi. She takes to prostitution because of poverty. Shocking as this may sound to the readers of Mwangi's novel, in view of her tender age, Susan is not an aberration in this desperately wretched slum in Nairobi. There are many Susans in African countries, who take to flesh peddling because of the economic situation of their nations. Both the male and female characters in the novel suffer under the same yoke of capitalism. They live in a society whose economic system impoverishes them. However, the womenfolk have a double yoke because, apart from the problem of impoverishment, they are also subjected to the affiliated problem of prostitution.

The argument so far has shown that the referent society of *Going Down River Road*, a postcolonial African nation (Kenya), has a bleak future. This is portrayed in the character of Baby, the derelict son of Wini. The youth who is supposed to be a symbol of the hope of the society is abandoned by his mother and survives only on the kindness of Ben; his future is foreshadowed in his being initiated by Max into taking *bhang*. Therefore, Mwangi, in this novel, suggests that there is little or no foreseeable exit out of the painful and dissonant realities of the neo-colonial African milieu. This view is premised on the end of the novel that is ambivalent but predominantly sombre. The last scenes of the novel justify this stand. For instance, Ben has dropped out of school; workers are out of a job after the completion of Development House; Ocholla's large, hungry family unexpectedly join him from the rural area; crops have failed; in fact, life is generally hard. The concluding paragraph of the novel confirms this. Ben and Ocholla are

adrift, still without a direction as they are staggering faster down the deserted River Road. Mwangi can be accused of over-exaggerating a situation of unmitigated bleakness, an absolute and intense presentation of woes recurring one after the other in the society of the “underdogs” with few traces of relief or hope. Throughout the plot of the story, the word “pain” keeps recurring, and there is no softening of the tragically charged tone; there is no ray of hope for the characters, not to talk of any occurrence of even a minor fulfilment. It can be rightly said that the overall statement is the futility of human efforts.

It should also be asserted that Mwangi in the novel tries to laugh his nation out of folly and misdirection through the use of humour. In the novel, some comic relief is inserted through the humour introduced in places like Karara centres and the political assembly of Machore. When Ben and Ocholla (or any other labourer) are not sweating it out on the construction site, they are either at a brother or at Karara Centre where they are gradually drinking away their senses and sorrow. They are depicted as simply a lot of hilarious, extremely humorous drunk people. This is the only way to stay sane in the hell where they live. For leisure, the labourers love music in addition to their liquor and prostitutes. Their reactions to the drumbeats are comic as their steps are never coherent. The humour in the drinking and dancing scenes is functional, serving as a painkiller, an escape from the realities of their lives. That this light-hearted presentation of serious topics passes as a stylistic achievement is not in dispute; rather, what is being argued here is that Mwangi’s limitless presentation of limitless pain has some touches of over-exaggeration.

To conclude, therefore, it should be emphasised that the novel only mirrors the socio-political situation of most African nations immediately after independence in a

somewhat uncritical manner. The “typical characters in typical situations” depicted in the novel are unheroic; most are anti-heroes. The novelist fails to go beyond the present since his story is handcuffed to the reflectionist perspective of fiction. *Going Down River Road* is therefore an implicit endorsement of the established order it appears to be interrogating. This observation is informed by the fact that Mwangi opposes the neo-colonial injustices in Kenya but at the same time artistically “celebrates” such misdeeds by his ultra-naturalistic depiction of them. The characters in the novel only resign themselves to their fate and give up; they are encumbered by despair, helplessness and ignorance. They are mostly “fixed, reified characters.”²⁴ Therefore, we vehemently reject the aesthetics of apology and pessimism orchestrated in the text. Obviously, Mwangi has succeeded in focusing his critical attention on the harsh realities of his milieu: injustice, hunger, oppression and exploitation, all of which engender postcolonial disillusionment in Kenyan society. However, the novel is flawed for only providing an abstract target, an ill-defined selfishness. That is, the novelist fails to proffer any solution to the social problems in the society, other than the self-transformation of the privileged. This blame-all, and ultimately -none, tendency is an ambivalent posture. This paper therefore condemns the naturalist Mwangi for the unmitigated bleakness and openness of his social criticism, and the absolute and intense presentation of woes that recur one after the other in the society of the underdogs. The novelist has merely shown people simply as they are, without dwelling on how they ought to be, as they are capable of becoming. One apparent lacuna in Mwangi’s fiction therefore is the appropriation of the visionary quality of art (taking the reader out of the real world). Actually, Mwangi seems to belong

to the ultra-naturalistic school that claims that art merely paints a picture of a society; it does not alter man's consciousness but confirms it.

We cannot gainsay the bitter truth that due to decades of external and domestic abuses of power, the African masses have suffered untold hardship in forms of stunted livelihoods, infrastructural decline, erosion of public institutions, corruption of social structures and values, stalled development, persistent conflicts, failed or anaemic states, weak economies and predatory governance; however, the uncovering of pathways from these predicaments requires new modes of fiction. The image of the Kenyan masses portrayed in the novel is that of self-seekers and foolish complacency, "people who believe that the system has nothing to do with their plight."²⁵ The tendency of the novelist and the characters to engage in naïve and innocent acceptance of the status quo ante robs the postcolonial African novel of its ability to envision solutions and alternatives to the exploitation and degradation of the African masses. In this era of globalisation and rapid technological advancement, African writers should strive to offer solutions that can tackle the avalanche of woes in their continent, taking cognizance of contemporary national, regional and global realities. Therefore, African fiction, instead of reflecting life, should also try to refract it. Postcolonial African novelists should not only show their readers what has been done or what has happened, rather, they should dwell on what can be done to change the ugly situation of their continent.

Notes

- ¹ Meja Mwangi, *Going Down River Road* (London: Heinemann, 1976).
- ² Shatto Gakwandi, "The Novel in East Africa" in S. O. Asein and A. O. Ashaolu, eds., *Studies in the African Novel* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1986), 186.
- ³ Ambanasom Shadrach, "Two Opposing Trends in Mongo Beti's Fiction: A Study of *Remember Ruben* and *Perpetua* (*Epasa Moto* 2.1, 2004), 123.
- ⁴ Adrian Roscoe, *Uhuru's Fire: African Literature East and South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 18.
- ⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1981), 5-6.
- ⁶ Nagesh Rao, "Resistance and Representation: Postcolonial Fictions of Nations in Crisis" (*Postcolonial Text*, <http://pkp.ubc.ca/pocol>, 1.1, 2004), 4.
- ⁷ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics, Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 78.
- ⁸ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Penguin, 1973), 395-396.
- ⁹ Mwangi, .54.
- ¹⁰ N. S. Jones Carey, *The Anatomy of Uhuru: An Essay on Kenya's Independence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), 199.
- ¹¹ Eustace Palmer, "Two Views of Urban Life: Meja Mwangi, *Going Down River Road*, Nurudin Farah, *A Naked Needle*" (*African Literature Today* 9, 1978), 105.
- ¹² Alan Swingewood, *Marx and Modern Social Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 88.
- ¹³ Mwangi, 13.
- ¹⁴ Adeleke Adeeko, "Two Writers on a Plundered Economy: A Study of Style and Political Vision in Selected Works of Ngugi and Mwangi" (unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Ife, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 1985), 18.
- ¹⁵ Mwangi, 196.
- ¹⁶ Christopher Okonkwo, "Space Matters: Form and Narrative in Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions*" (*Research in African Literatures* 34.2, 2003), 52.
- ¹⁷ Neil McEwan, *Africa and the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 124.
- ¹⁸ Elizabeth Knight, "Mirror of Reality: The Novels of Mwangi" (*African Literature Today* 13, 1983), 150.
- ¹⁹ Mwangi, 183.
- ²⁰ Ernest Emenyonu, "Introduction: A Matter of Commitment" in Ernest Emenyonu, ed., *Goatskin Bags and Wisdom: New Critical Perspectives on African Literature* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), xiv.

²¹ Richard Joseph, "PAS to Host Conference on Governance and Insecurity in West Africa" (*Program of African Studies*, 14.1, 2003), 1, 10.

²² Paul Tiyambe Zelesa, *Manufacturing African Studies and Crisis*. (Dakar: CODESRIA Book Series, 1997), 86.

²³ Okonkwo, 54. Although the statement is made as a comment on Tsitsi Dangaremba's novel, it is very relevant to the presentation of the plight of womenfolk in Mwangi's novel.

²⁴ John Lutz, "Pessimism, Autonomy, and Commodity Fetishism in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*" (*Research in African Literatures*, 34.2, 2003), 95.

²⁵ Udentia O. Udentia, *Revolutionary Aesthetics and the African Literary Process* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company, 1993), 73.