

## THE CREATIVE WRITER AS A SOCIAL CRITIC: A STUDY OF MEJA MWANGI'S *KILL ME QUICK* AND *GOING DOWN RIVER ROAD*

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### ABSTRACT

The creative writer in most societies rarely stays neutral. He draws his themes and sometimes formal features from his society and in doing so he takes a stand, whether positive or negative, on the experience he highlights. He addresses his message to his society to help members of the society in understanding themselves better. The aim of this study is to underline Meja Mwangi's role as a novelist and social critic as reflected in his works *Kill Me Quick* (1973 ) and *Going Down River Road* (1976 ) which best illustrate manifestations of the sordid socioeconomic problems that Mwangi persevered to expose and oppose. A justification for the treatment of this topic is related to the conviction that art has a functional role in awakening people's consciousness of the socio-economic condition for the purpose of rejecting all kinds of social and political abuse and injustice. The paper explicates Mwangi's skilful and artistic manipulation of his themes, settings, characters and technical devices in his novels to assert the pivotal role of the creative writer as a social critic.

**Keywords:** African literature, Meja Mwangi, literature and social criticism, *Kill Me Quick*, *Going Down River Road*.

### INTRODUCTION

The creative writer in most societies rarely stays neutral. He draws his themes and sometimes formal features from his society and in doing so he takes a stand, whether positive or negative, on the experience he highlights. He addresses his message to his society to help members of the society in understanding themselves better. To achieve optimum effect, he adopts a certain visionary ideal which pertains to the sociology, economics and politics of his society. In a sense, he becomes a committed writer.

Commitment as a literary concept connotes some attachment to, identification with or subscription to a recognizable set of goals or ideas. Writing on Jean-Paul Sartre, M. Adereth (1967) says that "commitment is inherent in the act of writing. To write, [Sartre] says, is to talk, and to talk is to reveal an aspect of the world, in order to change it." (p. 35). In other words, the writer's work can take the form of social criticism if he portrays the internal inadequacies of his society and the predicament of the individual in it. To A. Kettle (1988), the value of art lies not just in its capacity to entertain but in its power to increase our knowledge and understanding of the world thereby releasing new energy in us to change the world (p. 120). Commenting on the importance of social criticism in the African novel, C. Amuta (1986) claims "The writer is not only influenced by society; he influences it. Art not merely reproduces life but also shapes it. People may mould their lives upon the patterns of fictional heroes and heroines" (p.40).

After some years of independence, the problems of the new African societies began to gain attention in African novel writing. African novelists wage a war against neocolonialism, a period that comes after independence and suggests an indirect form of control by foreign powers over the economic, political and cultural aspects of former colonies through native political leaders (Arman, 2017, p. 56). These leaders fail the hopes of their people of a free democratic country marked by peace and prosperity. Instead of the paradise they have promised, they produce a country riddled with corruption and exploitation. People are disillusioned and frustrated. Consequently, Mwangi and his contemporaries of African writers feel the need to address the most prevailing social problems and identify themselves with the oppressed masses (Kehinde, 2004, p.95).

The aim of this study is to underline Meja Mwangi's role as a novelist and social critic as reflected in his works *Kill Me Quick* and *Going Down River Road* which best illustrate manifestations of sordid socioeconomic problems that Mwangi persevered to expose and oppose. Justification for the treatment of this topic is related to the conviction that art has a functional role in awakening people's consciousness of their social conditions for the purpose of finding the most possible remedies. Furthermore, an analysis of the technical devices employed by Mwangi in his above mentioned novels will be an invaluable asset to the illumination of the objective of the study.

Meja Mwangi (born 1948) is an African novelist whose literary oeuvre attests to his social commitment with the aim of highlighting the awareness of readers of the sordid socioeconomic condition of postcolonial African society. He has published many novels which include: *Kill Me Quick* (1973), *Going Down River Road* (1976), *Weapon of Hunger* (1989), *The Big Chiefs* (2007) and many other novels. According to Mwangi, the need to identify with the community, especially the masses and the oppressed, and to join in the struggle for liberty, justice, peace and progress is often profound. He, quoted by Tsuchiya (1978), admits that

What I want to write now is ... the various social problems at present having arisen from the process of modernizing post-independence Kenya, such as social crimes, unemployment and economic crises. By dealing with these problems I want to find out the African background of them. (p. 570 )

*Kill Me Quick* and *Going Down River Road* are set in the city. They are primarily concerned with man's struggle for socioeconomic survival. The world of both novels is that of disadvantaged and oppressed man, his bestial level of living, and his futile efforts to make a standard living. The novels present through vivid visual images and settings the absurdity of the human condition in modern Kenya.

*Kill Me Quick* is the story of Maina and Meja, two youths who have completed their secondary school education and have come to the city in search of jobs. Though they obtained good grades in their School Certificate Examination, there is no job for them anywhere or, rather, nobody is willing to employ them for even the meanest kind of jobs. Meanwhile they have to live in refuse bins in the backstreets amidst the unbearable "stench of the gutters" and "the foul smell of rotten vegetables"(p. 10). To get food, they have to scavenge for discarded and decaying foodstuffs in the refuse dumps and in this regard they have to compete with the city mongrels. When they get employed in a white settler's farm, they are exploited and so have to devise means of coping with the situation. When they are sacked for a theft they had not committed, they return to the backstreets in the city. Soon, circumstances drive them into crime - a thing they have dreaded all along and tried to avoid.

They go to prison several times and when the story ends Meja is back in prison to serve a fresh term and Maina is awaiting execution for a double murder he had inadvertently committed.

*Going Down River Road* tells the story of two friends Ben and Ocholla. Ben is a dismissed army Lieutenant who has to move on from his job in an insurance company when his army record catches up with him. He goes to live with Wini a young prostitute/secretary who has a bastard son, Baby. Wini runs all the household expenses and gives pocket money to Ben since he is unemployed. When Wini elopes with her white manager/boyfriend, Ben is stuck with Baby. Meanwhile he has been employed as a laborer in a building site under an Indian firm, Patel and Chakur Contractors. It is there that he meets Ocholla, who has abandoned his two wives and many children in the village to make a living in town. When Ben is evicted by his landlord, he and Baby move in with Ocholla in a hovel in the shantytown of Nairobi Valley. Much of the novel is taken up by their drudgery at the construction site and, when they have money, their visits to the hotels at night in search of wine and sex.

Both novels are united by their subject which is socio-economic insecurity as well as overlaps in their themes and settings. The central characters are poor people engaged in their quests for means of livelihood. In the case of Maina and Meja in *Kill Me Quick*, they are unemployed. Maina has given up hope of ever finding a job even though he has passed his School Certificate Examination very well. Meja also goes around looking for a job despite Maina's attempts to dissuade him. He too fails and on one occasion he had to be thrown out of an office for failing to leave when asked to do so. Their hopes of making a fortune and helping the parents who suffered to keep them in school are completely frustrated and they would rather stay in the city and suffer than go back to their homes:

More than twelve years in school with fees to pay and then I go back home and just hang around: no not me, Meja. Imagine how my friends who never went to school and always stayed at home will laugh! I believe that I have a right to something better if only for the effort I put into these examination weeks. And what about the fees I had to pay at school? I could have become a farmer without having to pay all that highly, you know. (*Kill Me*, p.3)

Being unemployed means they are without any means of processing food and shelter. As a result, they resort to living at a subhuman level. They sleep in refuse bins like city rats and have to abandon them early in the morning before the city cleaners would come and cart them away to the central refuse dump. They feed from the leftovers in the refuse dump and these are described thus:

There were various kinds of fruit in various stages of decay. There were also slices of stale, smelly bread and a few pieces of dusty chocolate. Some rock-hard cakes glared stonily back at them. Meja sat looking from one type of food to the other. The oranges were no longer orange and beautiful but a deathly grey with mould. The cakes were no longer cakes but fragments of rock and the chocolate looked like discarded shoe polish. (*Kill Me*, p.1)

They have in effect been reduced to the level of beasts.

When eventually they get a break, they are employed as farmhands by a white settler. Here, their suffering takes a new turn: they are exploited. Their meagre pay is complemented by daily rations of " a pint of skimmed milk" and "a tinful of maize meal"- provided "the foreman was satisfied by the day's work" (p.19) and he seldom is. Their sub-human living condition on this farm is reflected in their residence. They are put in a village "where life

made no boundaries between little children and puppies" (p.19) and the huts are "crowded together to save land for the more important wheat and maize fields"(p.18). The huts are described as being "flea-land" and "mice infested and leaking" (p.19). The walls are "plastered with bed bugs", "evil black soot hung from the roof like giant stalactites", and "the floor lay ...rough, corrugated and at least a foot deep in fine dust" (p.19). At night Maina and Meja have to wrap themselves securely in blankets to keep away the ferocious rats which come to lick the plates and nibble at their toes.

Despite all the inconveniences, they find the farm a much better place than the city especially since they are able to complement their meager remunerations with occasional pilfering from the kitchen and the orchard. Their happy stay here is cut short when they are unable to share their meager income with Boi, the cook who had recruited them in the city. After a period of strained relations, Boi plants in their hut a camera, clothing and other items he had stolen from their white boss. When he has raised an alarm and a search is conducted, the articles are found in the city youth's hut as was intended by him. Then, they are sacked and driven back to the city.

All the while Maina and Meja have resisted temptations of going into crime. Most young people in their situation resort to crime. Mina points out:

all my friends became thieves and robbers. I would have done the same too but ... [I] could never trust my speed for getting away with purse snatching. So my friends went into the main streets and snatched purses and they are almost all of them in prison now, for one reason or another. Me, I turned into the backstreets and thrived. (*Kill Me*, p. 2)

Circumstances change and they go into crime one after the other. Once when Maina ventures into the main streets and picks "two rotten apples", he is mistaken for a diamond thief and a pursuit ensues. He escapes but Meja whom he has transferred the package (of rotten apples) to is then pursued and driven under the wheels of a slow moving car. Meja survives after six months in hospital but now limps because the limbs have been deformed as a result of the accident. Maina is trying to reunite with his friend when he is intercepted by a gang leader, the Razor, who takes him on, teaches him some techniques of robbery and sends him out on operations with other members of the gang. After his discharge from hospital Meja tries to return to his family but abandons the idea: He is ashamed of returning deformed and with only "one dirty old shilling" which is "all his wealth" (p.90). After doing a stint in a stone quarry, he too goes into crime.

The prison scenes in *Kill Me Quick* indicate the high level of crime in the society. All kinds of young people are found in the prisons and there is much feeling of comradeship and contentment among the inmates as Maina testifies: "Here we eat and sleep and get counted and locked in cells. smooth life. Better than most hotels in town. There is no charge whatsoever" (*Kill Me*, p.119). They recount their exploits "with some dignity" and "their usual dirty stories" are "told and listened to with respect" (p.141). Even when they are released they look forward to a quick return to prison and to their friends there. It is ironic that Meja sees "freedom and security" in life in prison:

He looked round the small cell and smiled. He took a deep breath, his chest expanding to its maximum. The friendly warmth round him seeped into his heart and warmed it. The carefree smiling faces and white uniforms were a tonic. The four white-washed walls spelt freedom and security. Within these four walls of Number Nine only did he feel secure in the whole world. The food here was better than any he had eaten anywhere else in the city. And then

the smiling lively faces around him. He remembered the disinterested blank looks of the faces in the city streets and shook his head. (*Kill Me*, p.141)

The prison has an unhealthy influences on the prisoners and when they leave they perpetrate worse crimes. In the case of Maina, he is driven by the need for shelter to anger and violence which results in the unintended murder of a man and his wife.

The story of Ben and Ocholla in *Going Down River Road* differs significantly from that of the youths in *Kill Me Quick*. They are employed but as laborers. Though their work at the construction site is strenuous and carries a lot of health hazards in addition to constant fears of accidents, they are very poorly paid. But since there are no other jobs to be had anywhere else, they cannot strike or transfer to better paying jobs. Their employer is aware of this situation and uses it to his advantage. Even when a new contract is awarded it goes to the same foreign firm, Patel and Chakur Contractors, thus ensuring that the status quo is maintained. Ben's and Ocholla's employment in this firm emphasizes the theme of exploitation of labor. And since the contracting firm is Indian, the theme of exploitation of the national economy by foreigners apparently with the collaboration of Kenyan officials is hinted at. In this respect, Kehinde (2004) maintains:

In such societies that are plagued with dissonance and pain, racial tension is always the order of the day. For instance, the reader notices racial acrimony in the building site. Indian workers earn more than their African counterparts even though the latter do harder work. This is an enduring colonial legacy. The workers are, however, depicted as an impotent silent majority. (p.104)

Because these characters cannot afford the exorbitant rents charged by landlords, they are forcefully evicted. The only places left for such destitute are the shanty towns in Nairobi Valley and along River Road. There, they build their own shacks out of cartons, sticks, wire, iron sheets and paper. The government considers these slums an eyesore which could ruin the tourist industry. They send demolition teams which raze the shacks to the ground on the pretext that they constitute health hazard. A typical scene people go through at such times reveals the absurdity of their condition:

The two men salvage their property; aluminum mugs, crockery, crates, paper, rags. the whole of Nairobi Valley is awake in chaos. Up and down the stinking murky river fire, huge tongues of red hot fire, lick up contraptions of paper and wood and extend impotent black smoke to the dark heavens above. Shanty dwellers mill around saving whatever is possible. No one cries, not even the babies. They are all expert players. The game is survival. The whole family just play a role. Their part demands they keep calm, tolerant, and when the public health army is gone, rebuild with same quiet patience and determination. (*Going Down*, p. 177)

The shacks are rebuilt as fast as they were demolished and with amazing ingenuity. For these people, life must go on.

Mwangi uses the women in this novel to highlight further the harshness of life and bitter struggle people have to go through to survive. Their life style reveals the extent to which economic disadvantage can breed moral decadence and sub-human living conditions. A 'lucky' girl like Wini works as a secretary and doubles as a mistress to her white boss. To augment her income from these sources, she engages in part-time prostitution. At fourteen she already has had a baby. The rest, the majority, practises prostitution full-time and often in

very bizarre situations. Sometimes men have to queue to take their turns. As two partners haggle over payment, a tiny one month old baby which belongs to one of the prostitutes begins to cry. It had been wrapped in a "mass of rags" and hidden away in "a paper carton marked CORNED BEEF" (*Going Down*, p.56) It had apparently been disturbed in its sleep by the adults' argument. Such a scene is comic but the worst there could be.

Poverty breeds dissatisfaction and this is often expressed through violence. Instances of this abound in both novels. In *Kill Me Quick* violence is connected with crime and criminals. For example, the mob chases Meja until he is knocked down and injured by a car because he is suspected to have been an accomplice in a robbery. The Razor maintains discipline in his gang by threatening to cut them up with a flick knife. Maina has to hang for committing murder. In *Going Down River Road* there are instances of fist fights involving Ben and Onesmus (*Going Down*, P. 95), and between Ben and Sancho (*Going Down*, p. 143). Later, Ocholla kills Onesmus in a faked accident in order to neutralize the threat he posed to his friend (*Going Down*, p. 148). These acts do not just happen, but they are ways in which people manifest the anger and all the pent up emotions produced by their harsh environment. In such situations people are rarely rational and the tendency is often towards conflict and violence.

Socio-economic deprivation causes alienation as vindicated by people's attitudes to life and to their fellows. When the pressure of maintaining a home gets too much for her, Wini abandons her child and elopes with her boyfriend. Ocholla has to turn his back on his family and when they visit him in the city, uninvited, he adopts a hostile attitude towards them: They are "invaders" and their attempts to get friendly with Baby are seen by the latter as "hostile signals". To Ocholla, his wives are "bitches," and their children are "bastards," "criminals," "gangsters," and "little human animals"(183). Maina and Meja have been uprooted from their rural and natural roots. Their efforts to return to their people and in Maina's case it ends in murder.

The presentation of human condition in both novels is done mainly through the drawing of appropriate physical settings and the careful choice and deployment of lexical items which carry the novelist's vision adequately. Both novels are set in the city and two major types of scenes are highlighted here. The city streets are shown to form a kind of vicious labyrinth in which the individual who has been lured in by the glamour of the city is trapped and crushed. This aspect of the city is dramatized in the chase in *Kill Me Quick* which ends when Meja is knocked down by a moving car. The construction site in *Going Down River Road* is another dangerous area. Here, there is constant fear of people falling down from the high-rise building which is being put up; the cement dust which is always in the air is a major health hazard which threatens the life of every worker on the site; and Ocholla easily kills Onesmus by releasing a heavy crane bucket on his tripper. There are also the slums and backstreets which provide very vivid images of the misery in which the poor people in society live.

Mwangi's novels are remarkable for his careful choice and deployment of words which are appropriate for the meaning he wishes to convey:

The hot season came, heralded by swarms of flies and a dry dust-carrying wind that swept down the backstreets choking everything. The two young men became dehydrated and their bodies were covered in scales. Food from the bins dwindled and the competition with mongrels increased. The stench of the gutters became almost unbearable. (*Going Down*, p. 143; Emphasis mine)

The previous passage contains words which collocate in the context they have been used to convey images of the human environment: It is life-denying, verges on the sub-human (since men have to compete with mongrels); it is ugly and nauseating. Man in such an environment is seldom happy and contented. Such dissatisfaction with and anger at an oppressive environment is often expressed in the form of violence.

Mwangi's style of vividly exposing the society in all its ugliness and oppression has the effect of shocking us, awakening our consciousness and ultimately conditioning our minds to recognizing and combating evil. By divorcing from his novels under study references to real persons and institutions, we get the impression that he has no pretensions or designs on our consciousness and so are better disposed to seeing things through his eyes. Even when allusions are made to current affairs in *Going Down River Road*, they are intended to ridicule the naivety and narrowness of the common man's world. E. Palmer (1978) describes Mwangi's novels very adequately when he writes:

He [has] already shown his characteristic qualities: a touching compassion for the social or political underdog, a quietness of tone which emphasizes rather than obscures the very serious social problem being analyzed, and a remarkably controlled though unpretentious prose-style. (p. 307).

Though he does not claim any socialist sympathies, his commitment is to the welfare and economic liberation of the common people. The situation is grim but not hopeless. The characters do not fall into despair but attempt to overcome their handicaps. Even though some of their efforts take the forms of crime and anti-social habits these could be attributed to the dehumanizing conditions they live under. Odhiambo (2008) has suggested that the harsh circumstances in which they live have encouraged friendships among the characters. Such relationships are some of the ways they try to cope with a difficult situation (p.79).

## CONCLUSION

*Kill me Quick* and *Going Down River Road* assert the novelist's protest and social criticism on the worsening situation of the common man in Kenya. The artistic and effective manipulation of the themes, setting, characterization and style in these novels illuminates Mwangi's condemnation of the corruption, exploitation and decay of moral values perpetrated in independent African societies by Black imperialists leaders. By exposing the unremitting evil of the society, Mwangi makes his readers aware of the abuses and ills around them and urges them to struggle to attain socioeconomic justice and freedom.

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