

## **AYOBAMI KEHINDE**

### **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

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

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 ~~st(=)mo(=)lib(=)a(=)4(=)5(=)The(=)cre(=)nd(=)Ty(=)nd(=)H(=)ck(=)fe(=)10(=)ng(=)td(=)~~, the postcolonial

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

Meja Mwangi was boa Mwan

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







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,

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.”<sup>8</sup> 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

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

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.<sup>10</sup> 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

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."<sup>12</sup>

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







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.<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> 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

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.”<sup>19</sup> 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

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.<sup>21</sup>

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





lives under (post)colonization, which itself is an unfinished tale of history and identity.”<sup>23</sup>

The foremost factor in the plight of womenfolk portrayed in the novel is that of

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



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

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

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

<sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

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