

**POST-INDEPENDENCE DISILLUSIONMENT IN
CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN FICTION:
THE EXAMPLE OF MEJA MWANGI'S
*KILL ME QUICK***

AYO KEHINDE

Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

African writers have an enduring propensity for social and political commitment. Their texts mostly reflect and refract the socio-political events in their societies. Initially, African literature was a tool for celebrating the heroic grandeur of the African past; later it was used for anti-colonial struggle. Presently, it is being employed as a veritable weapon for depicting the postcolonial disillusionment in African nations. Therefore, African literature is always chained to the experiences of the peoples of the continent. In this paper, an attempt is made to examine the discourse of postcolonial decadence in contemporary African fiction. One of Meja Mwangi's novels of postcolonial disillusionment, *Kill Me Quick*, is used as the case study for the discussion. It is observed that in Mwangi's prose text, postcolonial pains in African nations are imaginatively captured with apt narrative devices.

Keywords: commitment, postcolonial, disillusionment, decadence, pain

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary African novel is a vast phenomenon. However, that magnitude is perhaps the least of the difficulties facing the critic in attempting to give a fair view of this ever-growing field. A more formidable problem arises from the fact that African writers are writing two different kinds of fiction. First, there is the social-realistic narrative convention that has been familiar to readers and still exists. Second, there is the other kind in which a new language prevails; this is relatively unfamiliar to many – perhaps even most – readers.

In the present paper an effort is made to examine Mwangi's views about the plight of the masses in neo-colonial African societies as they are reflected in his fiction. This is premised on the awareness that there is always a close relationship between African literature and its historical context(s). Essentially, one of his novels of post-independence criticism, *Kill Me Quick* (1973), is explored with a view to highlighting how he has contributed to the discourse of the motifs of pains and disillusionment in the postcolonial African novel. The multiple paths that are followed include a thorough examination of the ideologies and context(s) within which the work was produced, the consideration of the expression of life of disenchantment and pain in the novel

and the analysis of its aesthetics. All lead to the unmasking of the novel as a socially symbolic act, that is, a reflection of the problems of the author's immediate society, in particular, and the African continent in general.

NARRATING POSTCOLONIAL DISILLUSIONMENT

In *Kill Me Quick* the reader encounters a new realistic fiction from Kenya. Mwangi has been greatly influenced by Leonard Kibera's realistic description of the contemporary urban world of Nairobi (see Calder 1984; Johansson 1990; Knight 1983). There is a concentration on the perennial dissonance among individuals, especially as this discord manifests itself in the areas of prime interest to the novelist – social classes, races, genders, religions, politics and domestics. It presents a harsh account of urban life in postcolonial Kenya. His fiction reveals that one major unfortunate problem runs through the (neo)colonial African societies – frustration or betrayal of trust. To Ifidon Ehimika (1999: 147), “every society is heterogeneous, and conflict is a feature of interaction among its components”. Mwangi's novel also reveals that in African neo-colonial societies, the seeds of disharmony, mediocrity and macabre corporate distrust have been sown; corruption and rampant scarcity of personal integrity have replaced the hitherto peaceful existence. In fact, the novel has altered the traditional map of African fiction beyond recognition because of his undisguised depiction of postcolonial decadence and the harshness and abruptness of its style (Griffiths 2000). The novel is a chronicle of the existential and societal realities of the neo-colonial Kenyan nation. This validates Ahmad Aijaz's (1992: 101) assertion that “all third-world texts are necessarily national allegories”. The theme of postcolonial decadence in the text thus becomes a metaphor for the history of neo-colonial African nations, which are encumbered with dislocation, alienation, depression and deprivation. Resonating through the novel is an echo of the painful existence of the masses in the neo-colonial society, which creates a motley array of failure and ridiculous figures.

Kenya, the referent society of the text, has been enmeshed since 1963 in the crucible of deaths and births, agony, poverty, dehumanisation and starvation. These, despite their differentiating phraseologies, work towards the same objective: the vitiation of human dignity. Hence, *Kill Me Quick*, like many other postcolonial African novels, reveals an atmosphere of fear, hate, humiliation and an aura of repression, in forms of arrest, exile and execution. It highlights the dictatorial and oppressive tendencies of the imperialists and neo-colonial rulers in African nations. According to Josaphat Kubayanda (1990), this is the general visceral sentiment that forms the background of Mwangi's fiction, as well as most postcolonial African texts. Common issues in postcolonial literary works include tyranny, corruption and other forms of oppression. Edward Said (1993: 19) declares: “domination and inequities of power and wealth are perennial facts of human society”. There emerges from Mwangi's handling of disillusionment

and pain a virulent critique of the African past and present, and a pessimistic view of future evolution. His vision is certainly a “grim view of a doomed society” (Gakwandi 1986: 159). The social injustices of neo-colonialism constitute the driving dynamic in the novel. The problem of class stratification in neo-colonial African societies is captured vividly at the beginning of the novel:

Meja sat by the ditch swinging his legs this way and that. A few people passed by engrossed in their daily problems and none of them gave the lanky youth a thought. But the searching eyes of Meja missed nothing. They scrutinized the ragged beggars who floated ghostly past him as closely as they watched the smart pot-bellied executives wrinkling their noses at the foul stench of backyards. And between these two types of beings, Meja made comparison (*Kill Me Quick*, 1).

Mwangi selects realistic details from ordinary life, and his novel chronicles the fate of an impotent silent majority. He has a vision of life as hell. His fiction shows him to be a humanist because human concerns like class and gender inequality remain largely foregrounded in the novel. In consequence, in *Kill Me Quick*, Mwangi's thematic focus centres on the portrayal of the terrifying, the painful, and a common insistence on postcolonial disillusionment. As a naturalist, he observes the panoramic view of his society and fictionalises it as it is. He exposes his society's filth, decay, contradictions and conflicts with a view to presenting a true picture of it. His excremental vision of the society is similar to that of Ayi Kwei Armah in his *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969) and Debo Kotun in his *Abiku* (1998). Unlike the socialist realist who believes in the inevitability of change, Mwangi, the naturalist, simply depicts his society in the way it is without suggesting how to change the situation. His literary agenda is to present life in all its details, free of any preconceived notions of its meaning (Kurtz 1998; Udentia 1993). The sense of dismay with which he confronts the corruption and divisions in the new post-independence regime in Kenya is unmistakable. In the novel, Mwangi gives a scathing indictment of the failure of the new state to provide opportunities for the youths.

The issues of disillusionment and pain, which are found in Mwangi's previous novels, are shown in their contemporary fullness in *Kill Me Quick*, the novel in which he takes up the fact that conflict is unavoidable in human society, and shows what happens when one engages in social conflict with one's society. It takes as its thematic focus the foregrounding of the exploitation of the masses by the ruling class, betrayal of public confidence, administrative bureaucracy, highly decadent and socially stratified society that breeds and nurtures exploitation and oppression of the less privileged in society. In the main the text dwells on the suffering endured by innocent humanity, as a result of exploitation and crises of the world.

Social relationships are permanently tense in the novel, and are marked by continuous dissonance, frustration and incompatibility. As if natural calamity is not an albatross about the neck of the Kenyans, there is also the problem of class

conflict. This is an index of unfulfilled hope. Although the independence sought in Mwangi's *Carcase for Hounds* is ultimately achieved, nothing tangible has happened to the resolution of the crises of land tenure. The economics still reflect the interest of the imperial power and the associated dominant groups. New forces and ideas come to the fore, presaging major social and economic changes. The society still reflects some characteristic social and economic structures created by colonial rule. Jude Agho (1993: 121) comments on this:

Post-independence Kenya, like many other countries in Africa, is faced with another rift: a horizontal rift dividing the elite from the mass of the people. Contemporary Kenya has not only witnessed the frustration of the peasants who had hoped for a better life after independence, but their deepening impoverishment and exploitation.

At the end of the emergency, the ends do not justify the means. The loss was simply too much to justify the efforts. This is a betrayal of ideals and trust. The utter uselessness and senselessness of the anarchy has become the major preoccupation of contemporary East African writers. Jomo Kenyatta (1968), in his *Suffering Without Bitterness*, reiterates the aspirations and yearnings of the Kenyan people from the Mau Mau war:

Our march to freedom has been long and difficult. There have been times of despair, when only the burning conviction of the rightness of our cause has sustained us. Today, the tragedies and misunderstandings of the past are behind us. Today, we start on the great adventure of building the Kenya nation (1968: 212).

However, several years later, the aspirations of the people have still not been met. The pervading socio-political climate is inundated with disillusionment and lack of fulfilment. The hard-gotten independence has turned a curse, because:

The majority of Kenyan peasants live in a state of poverty. [...] The life of the urban poor is made worse by appalling housing conditions and poor urban services. The misery of the poor in Kenya is highlighted by the extravagance of the African nouveau riche. [...] the socio-economic position of the Kenyan masses is desperate (Tamarkin 1978: 314).

The neo-colonial African society depicted in *Kill Me Quick* is in a stage of stultifying poverty. The wealth is in the hands of a privileged minority, which surrounds itself with country houses, cars, washing machines, television sets, and all the consumer durables that are associated with an acquisitive middle class. The economic position of the peasants is extremely precarious (Griffiths 2000). Living standards are steadily deteriorating under neo-colonialism; wages are insufficient to provide for the people's basic needs, and there are a large number of unemployed that the incipient earners have to support. Life for the masses of the dog-eat-dog world of the Nairobi back streets (symbolized by Meja and Maina) is a living hell characterized by extreme poverty, fear, land shortage, crimes, famine, drought, hunger, unemployment and a very limited

horizon, since there is little chance of upward mobility. People have to live in this atmosphere of indifference, psychological tumult, like paranoia, recidivism, criminality, kleptomania, and the like. Everywhere the ordinary person turns to, s/he encounter class hate, rejection, discord and fear. S/He goes through this ordeal until s/he dies or is put in gaol for life. In fact, the epic grandeur of the perseverance and nobility of soul of the peasant in postcolonial African continent are obvious. The needy and the downtrodden can endure endless suffering; their patience sometimes attains epic proportions. As a result of the struggle by members of the society for survival and accumulation of surplus, the emergence of class conflicts becomes inevitable. This has led to the polarization of the society into classes or strata (the haves and the have-nots). East African writers, like their colleagues in other areas of the world, have responded to the question of class formation. It is in the context of this realization that one situates Mwangi's postcolonial novels, including especially *Kill Me Quick*.

In this text Mwangi borrows ideas from contemporary history to pass comments on the social ills of the Kenyan society. Actually, an excessively materialistic and vain society often experiences a terrible level of moral decadence and spiritual vacuity. The living conditions are often dehumanising, and existence becomes cheapened. The novel centres on the plight of the Kenyan masses that have been brutalized by social stratification. When they can no longer sustain themselves, since the economy is in the hands of foreign interests whose concern is the production of food for profit and exploitation of foreign markets rather than feeding the masses, the youths and women are forced to move into the cities. Actually, when Meja and Maina find their rural community too myopic and claustrophobic for their job-seeking souls, the Nairobi city suddenly drags them to its bosom. There they become victims of dehumanisation and gross exploitation. They are “foreigners” in the cities, aliens to the coterie of Kenyan bourgeoisie, misfits to their families and pariahs to the society at large. In their rural setting, life is peaceful; people go about their daily chores without hurry. The rural society, therefore, signifies satisfaction, filial love and neighbourly humane feelings. The city, on the other hand, is marked by artificiality, eroticism, marginalization, dreadful individualism, loss of pristine being, and dancing to the tunes of western values. The equation is simple: the city is psychic chaos; the rural area is psychic quiet. Actually, the rural-urban drift that is a thematic preoccupation of this novel signifies that independence has not been good to the rural setting. This creates a town-bound migration of school leavers (like Meja and Maina) and other able-bodied men and women from the rural areas. The two frustrated boys – Meja and Maina – signify the multitudes of problems facing the common man in neo-colonial African societies. The structure of the story is also tailored to reflect the thematic preoccupations of the novel and the ordeals and vicissitudes of life of the African masses. Initially, the plot is linear, but later it becomes bifurcated when Meja and Maina part company for a while. Meja is in hospital while Maina is with Razor's gang. The omniscient narrator does not fail to capture the happenings in both locations with a view to giving a comprehensive picture of

the plights of the masses. The techniques of reversed narrative time-sequence and the repetitive nature of the fate of the two protagonists signify the inevitability of failure in the referent world of the story. The recurring dilemma of the boys also reflects the political and social failures of the post-independence Kenyan nation in particular and the entire African continent in general.

What is the fate of the town-bound individuals, the job seekers, in postcolonial African nations? This forms the thematic focus of Mwangi in *Kill Me Quick*. Musa Mashanga (1970: 43), quoting from Rene Dumount's *False Start in Africa*, provides an insight into the plight of the rural dwellers that migrate to the city:

Before long, these young people will end up in the Shanty towns of the capitals and become social parasites. Their days are spent writing job requests that pile up in all the administrations. Some of them join the underground.

Therefore, life in the cities is full of pains and conflicts. These cover the experiences described in *Kill Me Quick*: bad habitation, malnutrition, unemployment, distress, agony, starvation, cold, alienation, ill health and misery. The Shantytown, where the deprived masses live in the novel, is used as an objective and concrete index of the characters and their material impoverishment. There is indeed a correspondence between individuals and their physical environment. The teenagers experience everything that negates joy: "The boys fetched food from bins, slept in bins and lived in the backyards, in bins" (*Kill Me Quick*, 9). In the novel Mwangi dwells perceptively on unemployment, which is one of the most formidable problems facing some postcolonial African nations. In Kenya, for instance, there were fewer than one million jobs for the population of about ten million (Mashanga 1970).

Through the characters in the novel, most especially Meja and Maina, Mwangi exposes the complex problems confronting the Kenyan State, the suffering of the populace in the midst of plenty and the inability of the state to cater for its citizens. The ordeals of the destitute in Mwangi's fiction are similar to those portrayed by Festus Iyayi (1982) in his *The Contract* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1980) in *Devil on the Cross*. The protagonists of the novel, Meja and Maina, cannot get the type of job their academic qualifications entitle them to, not even when they agree to sweep and wash dishes and chop wood. When, in their desperation, they overlook the warning sign – "NO VACANCY, HAKUNA KAZI" (5) – the inconsiderate and impatient managers order for them to be thrown out of their offices by bouncers.

Undaunted, the boys would do odd-jobs in order to survive, but they always end up being cheated. The exploitation of the two job-seekers reaches its peak during their brief employment in the white settler's farm where they are paid as little as possible. Their misery and the inhumane condition under which they live are best reflected in their huts, which they share with rats, bed bugs and fleas. Thus, Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*, like his other postcolonial novels, reflects the continuing cant, corruption, degeneration and frustration witnessed in Africa.

The novel sums up Mwangi's concern for the prevalent social anomalies in neo-colonial Kenya, and it is a graphic demonstration of Mwangi's sympathy for the underprivileged members of his society. His choice of this vision is unique, reflecting his awareness of people's predicament even in the midst of abundant resources. The characters are presented in such a way that they signify the overwhelming disparity between the dominant, privileged exploiter-class and the exploited. The characters in the novel constitute the class of people that groans under "food crisis, deplorable mass poverty, decimating diseases and pervasive illiteracy" (Onimode 1988: 2). The novelist uses their daily experiences to harp on the helplessness of the masses in neo-colonial African societies.

The common man, rendered abstract and shadowy, is living in a world of anonymity. Meja and Maina are sketched out in a society in which they think they are pariahs. At the beginning of the story, they are frustrated and almost destroyed by poverty. They are entrapped in their woeful and painful world. Also, their painful conditions of living are revealed in their feeding and dressing. Actually, the old and shabby dresses they wear locate them in their social class. For instance, "Maina was dressed in khaki shorts, now tattered and anything but khaki in colour, and his feet were bare and horny, the nails of the toes standing out at weird angles" (3-4). Poverty is not limited to the two boys; we are told that the houses in Shanty land are low and built of tins. Thus, the residents of the land and the occupants of the trenches constitute what Frantz Fanon (1970) refers to as "the wretched of the earth". A dearth of infrastructures, broken-down shanties, a disordered pattern of settlements, filth and squalid lives all signify the habitation of the common man. The major characters in the novel (Meja and Maina) are typical of African unemployed youths. Mwangi dwells on the sordid details of the locations. This compels the reader take a sympathetic view of the plight of the masses.

The novel is a public parade of crime and social alienation. This is no longer an external oppression, but an internal recolonization, in which certain privileged individuals oppress their compatriots. Thus, pain is a ubiquitous phenomenon in the human milieu. Unemployment is one of the most formidable problems facing the developing countries. Often, many able-bodied people scramble for the very few available jobs. The 'Mejas' and 'Mainas' do not know this. The next crop of youngsters notice only those who have made well, not the rest who have drifted into slums. The Mwangian frustrated men are like Samuel Selvon's immigrants in his *The Lonely Londoners* who are offered the worst jobs and often driven to live as pirates or parasites on the fringes of a hostile society. The slide into crime in Mwangi's novel can thus be regarded as merely one dimension of a wider and deeper struggle between the exploiters and the exploited. Given the tortuous experiences of the frustrated boys, it is no surprise that very soon they have recourse to criminal acts and become paranoid. One cannot excuse Maina's, Meja's and their cohorts' sudden slide into crime, but the real issue is to see beyond their acts (which are only symptoms) and identify the circumstances that could have turned once normal and innocent young men

into such recidivists. And this is the important message in the novel. Meja makes a similar observation when he ponders on the allegation of murder levelled against his friend, Maina:

More than anything else, Maina had always wanted to remain clean... He would rather eat from dustbins than steal. I knew him well. He would not just kill people. It is not like him to hurt anyone. I don't even understand how we came to be among criminals. I honestly don't know. We never even thought of it when we were together. It is so... so... He shook his head painfully and the tears overflowed. He did not dry them. Why did this have to happen to him? They say it is fate but is it really? Is it? (149).

Among the main characters in the novel, there are portraits of people suffering from deep physical and mental atrophy. They look forward to the simple and unvaried pleasures of their lives. When frustration is intense and the individual's inner controls are poorly developed or temporarily lowered, assaultive or homicidal acts may result. This, perhaps, accounts for Maina's attempted suicide in the novel. After he has had frustrating experience of abortive job seeking, he attempts suicide. In the text, Mwangi shows repeatedly the frustration of energy and ambition plaguing the postcolonial African masses. If Mwangi's *Carcase for Hounds* seems to express almost complete despair, yet its pessimism is not as totally slackly and complacently negative as that of *Kill Me Quick*. The characters lack companions, except flies and mongrels. The irony of life is shown by the comparatively improved living conditions in prison custody, which has dim electric light. There, they are also able to sleep on blankets, and are recognized by being counted. The world of the novel is where prison custody is even preferable to hostile freedom: "at least that was better than living in a quarry and burrowing in the rock for the rest of one's life" (119). Commenting on the life in prison, Remy Oriaku (1982: 114) claims:

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. Even when they are released they look forward to a quick return to prison and to their friends there.

The people experience slow death and an avalanche of failures. They also experience a wide range of exploitation, like chopping of wood for housewives in the suburbs, collection of and sale of scrap metals, and serfhood in a white settler's farm. This is the painful experience of man in neo-colonial African societies. Meja is haunted and hunted by nostalgia. His family expects him to send them money as soon as he secures a job that is not forthcoming. He even accepts to work in the white man's farm, because of the promise of free feeding and wages. He thinks this will be a little improvement on his earlier experiences - living on decayed food and exposure to the vagaries of weather.

However, the experience at the farm shows that there is no way out of suffering in a decadent society. More often than not, Meja lives on half-rationed

food and “skewed” milk. He is also overworked and underpaid. His employment in the white man's farm shows him in another round of battle with fate. Boi, the chief serf of the farm, frames Meja and his friend (Maina) up in a stage-managed theft case. His attempt to return home after being discharged from hospital – having been involved in a serious accident – is pathetic. He finds it difficult to show himself to his family, due to his negative metamorphosis – a once optimistic man, a ray of hope to his family, now "a young man with tattered clothes and a bewildered face" (84). When he finally comes face to face with his little sister, Wambui, he develops cold feet. His earlier promises before he left home for the city have been a mirage. To aggravate his frustration, he hears the news of his father going out to borrow money for Wambui's school fees. This is unbearable; he collapses, recovers and finally flees.

The ordeals endured by Meja show that he is up against some circumstances he cannot control; he is a disappointment to those who had hoped much in him. He cannot face the accusations, disappointment and recriminations of his family because he has not been able to bring home the promised gift of a ‘necklace’, which is a symbol of wealth, fulfilment and hope. Maina's life is also full of pain and hatred. In the white man's farm, Maina and Meja have a kind of guerrilla warfare with decrepit Boi. At times, Maina buries his sorrow in talking and laughing. He is portrayed in his habit of telling the same story over and over again. A psychoanalytical excursion into his mind reveals to us a repetition of mental imbalance that is symptomatic of frustration. Often, when he becomes moody, he seeks solace in a sequestered place to cry his heart out. He is always unlucky because he is often being antagonized. He finds himself in the company of a gang of robbers, after a speeding car had knocked down Meja. Thus, the two ill-fated colleagues part company for a while, leaving both with no reliable companion. This is a great transition in their lives, a new stage in their quest to pass through the thorny paths of the world. Maina is even detested by some members of Razor's gang. This is mostly evident in Sweeper's hostile attitude towards him. He also lives in perpetual fear of the Razor's blade, of the police and of the crowd. The lives of the members of the Razor's gang depict the common plight of the masses. However, the novelist is able to tone down his portrayal of the wretchedness of the masses through the employment of humour. For instance, the neo-colonial rulers are lampooned through the use of humorous tags: “The Minister of Economic Misplanning and Underdevelopment” (33). With this, the reader realises the bitter truth that the neo-colonial African leaders are misruling their individual nations; they are subjecting the masses to hunger and social degradation because of their ineptitude, corruption and selfishness. They consequently lead the continent into perennial underdevelopment and stagnation.

Like Meja's, Maina's attempt to go back to his family is frustrating. He is tossed to and fro as he keeps on asking for his father's house in the village. He is also humiliated when he hears that his father has sold the house, and has therefore moved away after his children had gone to town one after the other to look for him (Maina). In the course of this psychological and social pain, we still

see Maina navigating through the labyrinth of agonizing physiological problems. This leads him to commit murder out of frustration. He is thus sent to jail where he undergoes a lot of torture and is awaiting the execution of his sentence of death by hanging. This is the end of a once ambitious, basically educated, initially optimistic and virtuous boy. Brooding in his own cell, about the fate of his partner, Meja concludes that his friend, Maina, is driven into crime by the societal system that is very frustrating.

Another aspect of Meja and Maina's sordid experiences in life is the condition of Shanty land, a place of the jobless and drug addicts, a haven for rogues and robbers. The living conditions of Shanty land are very dehumanising. It is the poorest form of habitation one could think of. The hardened criminals (the Razor's gang) are depicted as being physically ugly and disfigured. They are possibly dragged into a world of crime by circumstances similar to those of Maina and Meja. Shanty land is devoid of security and safety. It is prone to arson, assault, insult, betrayal of trust and neglect. For instance, the Razor, as the leader of the gang, holds the power of life and death over his men. This is a general experience at the modern-day African cities. The lives of the masses, as explicated in the novel, reveal that they are victims of constant flights – from their friends, their families and from the society at large.

The novel captures the pains of the oppressed in the class-enclave of Kenya. Meja and Maina strike us as breathing an aura as fateful as that of Samsa Gregor in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. The boys are emaciated and incapacitated with frustration. This is a very sordid situation of life. In fact, *Kill Me Quick* has its climax in the very first sentence. The rest of the story falls away from this high point of astonishment in one long expiring sigh, punctuated by series of sub-climaxes. It is not stretching the issue to declare that the painful and dissonant views of life experienced in the novel are similar to the existential and societal realities of life that are expressed in the Epigraph of Alex La Guma's *The Stone Country*:

While there is a lower class, I am of it.

While there is a criminal element, I am of it.

While there is a soul in jail, I am not free (1967: 9).

Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* is a statement both of faith and of fact. The novelist chronicles the fact of suffering through decades of neo-colonialism and imperialism. He equally foregrounds the faith in the masses' Spartan strength and will to survive. We observe in the struggle of Meja and Maina dreams transformed by tyrants into a nauseating mirage. The boys represent the masses in search of space; they are denied, stifled and partially destroyed. The reader witnesses a bleak time of destitution and deprivation of the common man in neo-colonial Kenya. Mwangi has used this text as a means of social advocacy, the hope of quickening the attainment of a better world. His description of ordinary life is marked by the hurt sense of deprivation. As a predominantly social-realist novel, *Kill Me Quick* emphasizes the mimetic and didactic, and is therefore socially oriented. Injustice, inequality, dehumanisation by the industrial and

capitalist system, poverty and corruption form the thematic concerns of the novel. This corroborates the assertion of Huma Ibrahim (1990: 85) that the African novel reflects:

social and political realities of the post-independence era in which the colonizer has been replaced by a political elite. African literature of the past two decades have transformed the theme of disillusionment. Where the colonizer was once the sole object of criticism, now African technocrats, cadres and government officials are depicted exploiting the masses they had promised to uplift.

CONCLUSION

The critical climate in African literary scholarship has thus come to favour fiction, which acknowledges and builds on social realism. Chidi Amuta (1986: 40) rightly declares the importance of social realism in African literature thus: “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”. Mwangi’s fiction falls within the body of literary works which goes by the general appellation of “literature of disillusionment”, which is premised on the observation that experience in our neo-colonial societies ultimately reduces to a dance of death, in which history is the major celebrant cast in the role of death (Biodun Jeyifo, 1984). Deductively, Mwangi, like other promoters of this literary canon, believes that novels of disillusionment give expression to a profound rejection of African societies as they are presently constituted, especially in terms of their human dimensions. An objective analyst of the malaise of postcolonial African nations, Mwangi does not lay all the blames for the avalanche of pains in Africa at the doorstep of the colonial masters, rather he believes that the neo-colonial indigenous rulers are even worse than the white colonialists. The lives of Meja and Maina in the text suggest that independence in African nations has not been very beneficial to the masses. Therefore, there is a recurrence of undisguised bitterness against the black African rulers who have betrayed their nations; this is reflected in the characterization, tone and language of the novel. This supports the assertion of Edward Said (1993):

Blaming the Europeans sweepingly for the misfortunes of the present is not much of an alternative. What we need to do is to look at the matters as a network of interdependent histories that it would be inaccurate and senseless to repress, useful and interesting to understand (19).

In fact, African literature exists in a historical continuum. The writers, including Mwangi, depict the problems of neo-colonialism in their various texts. They show their disenchantment to the present landscape and socio-political structures of their nations. They assert bitterly that the collective joy of the events of

independence in which the entire nations at different times seemed to be swept up as an enormous celebration has been a nightmare and betrayal. The postcolonial African writers always depict their continent as a place where the rulers have failed woefully to protect their nations' truncated authority and integrity from the ravages of neo-colonialism and globalization.

REFERENCES

- Agho, Jude. 1993.
Disillusionment and Alienation in the Novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Alex La Guma and Sembene Ousmane. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Ibadan.
- Aijaz, Ahmad. 1992.
In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures. London: Verso.
- Amuta, Chidi. 1986.
Towards a Sociology of African Literature. Oguta: Zim Pan-African Publishers.
- Armah, Ayi Kwei. 1969.
The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born. London: Heinemann.
- Calder, Angus. 1984.
Meja Mwangi's Novels. *The Writing of East and Central Africa*. G. D. Killam (ed.), pp. 23–44. London: Heinemann.
- Ehimika, Ifidon. 1999.
Social Rationality and Class Analysis of National Conflict in Nigeria: A Historiographical Critique. **Africa Development** xxiv (1&2): 145–163.
- Fanon, Fantz. 1970.
The Wretched of the Earth. Trans. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gakwandi, Shatto. 1986.
The Novel in East Africa. In: S.O. Asein and A.O. Ashaolu (eds.), *Studies in the African Novel*, pp. 82–192. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Griffiths, Gareth. 2000.
African Literatures in English: East and West. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education.
- Ibrahim, Huma. 1990.
The Violated Universe: Neocolonial Sexual and Political Consciousness in Dambudzo Marechera. **Research in African Literatures** 21(2): 79–90.
- Iyayi, Festus. 1982.
The Contract. London: Longman.

Jeyifo, Biodun. 1984.

Literary Aesthetics and the Neo-colonial Dance Macabre: Achebe and Soyinka as Theorists of Literature. Unpublished Seminar Paper, Department of Literature in English, University of Ife.

Johansson, Lars. 1990.

In the Shadow of Neocolonialism: Meja Mwangi's Novels (1973–1990). Umeå, Sweden: Umeå University Publications.

Kafka, Franz. 1916.

Metamorphosis. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Kenyatta, Jomo. 1968.

Suffering Without Bitterness. Nairobi: EAPH.

Kotun, Debo. 1998.

Abiku. California: Nepotis.

Kubayanda, Josaphat. 1990.

Dictatorship, Oppression and New Realism. **Research in African Literatures** 21(2): 5–12.

Kurtz, Roger. 1998.

Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel. Oxford: James Currey.

La Guma Alex. 1967.

The Stone Country. London: Heinemann.

Knight, Elizabeth. 1983.

Mirror of Reality: The Novels of Mwangi. **African Literature Today** No 13: 146–57.

Mashanga, M. 1970.

Education and Frustration. **East African Journal** VIII: 39–46.

Mwangi, M. 1973.

Kill Me Quick. London: Heinemann.

1974 *Carcase for Hounds.* London: Heinemann.

Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. 1980.

Devil on the Cross. London: Heinemann.

Onimode, B. 1988.

A Political Economy of the African Crisis. London: Zed Books.

Oriaku, R. O. 1982.

Protest and Revolution in the Kenyan Novel: The Examples of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Meja Mwangi. Unpublished Masters' Essay, University of Ibadan.

Said, E. 1993.

Culture and Imperialism. New York: Vintage Books.

Selvon, Samuel. 1956.

The Lonely Londoners. Harlow, Essex: Longman.

Tamarkin, M. 1978.

The Roots of Political Stability in Kenya. **African Affairs** 77: 297–320.

Udenta, O. Udenta. 1993.

Revolutionary Aesthetics and the African Literary Process. Enugu:
Fourth Dimension.

About the author: Dr. Ayo Kehinde is a lecturer at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, where he teaches courses in African Literature (oral and written), New Literatures in English, Modern Authors, and Literary Theory. He has published or has forthcoming articles in several national and international learned journals.