

**CORRUPTION AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT IN
AFRICAN LITERATURE: A REVIEW OF MEJA
MWANGI'S *KILL ME QUICK* AND *GOING DOWN
RIVER ROAD*.**

By

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Abstract

Corruption has always begot underdevelopment in Africa and elsewhere but Africa's case is worse. The writings of Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Meja Mwangi and other East African writers have always illustrated the relationship between literature and society as well as the social functions of literature. It is the contention of this article that corruption is the bane of Africa's backwardness and underdevelopment and that corruption is one of the long standing effects of colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism. Although other factors outside these engender corruption, it is perhaps one of the greatest tragedies to have befallen Africa as a continent. Highlighting the social function of African literature, Ngugi contends that African literature gives vent and credence to the society that produces it. The

arrival of Europeans in the 19th century to East Africa led to a situation of cultural contact and infiltration between them and the Gikuyu, a culturally homogeneous group that occupied a vast area of the fertile land in the Kenyan high lands. This vast land was conducive to cash cropping animal husbandry as a result of a temperate climate. The British settlement in Kenya was under the guise of founding a national home for the Jewish race and of course to Christianize the land as it were. After the First World War, part of the land owned by the Gikuyu was officially appropriated for resettling ex-soldiers and thereafter followed open seizure and illegal speculation by white farmers. This seizure produced forced labour, abuse of women and children as well as land grabbing and socioeconomic exploitation and other attendant negative effects that have festered and metamorphosed into a hydra headed monster in East Africa and the continent in general.

There is no disputing the fact that corruption is endemic in Africa and has like a cankerworm eaten deep into the fabric of our continent. The backwardness, underdevelopment and perhaps all other negative tendencies attributed to Africa can be arguably traced to corruption in different spheres and strata on the continent. Often times, Africa is the laughing stock of the world as she is about the poorest and most underdeveloped continent in the world, with the worst poverty rate, hunger, disease, nonexistent and dilapidated infrastructure, poor leadership and perhaps the most disillusioned people in the world.

The tale of Africa is like a sore on the smooth body of the world. However, it is the contention of this paper that Africa did not just become corrupt out of the blues. The deep seated corruption that Africans have imbibed is as a result of the pervasive corruption and exploitative tendencies of primordial tenets chief among which are slavery, colonialism, imperialism which devastated, negated and raped the humanity of the people.

This paper argues that the colonial lords and exploiters forced corruption on us and the resultant corruption is a culmination of untold hardship, exploitation, oppression and dehumanization; corruption as was witnessed in the past and even today is not because Africans are configured to be corrupt but rather as a survival strategy to ameliorate and mitigate the obnoxious inhuman and bestial treatment meted on Africans by colonialism and its attendant negative and draconian dictates/agenda. It is common knowledge that corruption has affected nearly all strata of our lives and it is a sickening bitter reality that the continent has to deal with.

Ngugi Wa Thiongo believes that “Colonialism is of course a practice and not a theory. It is a historical process and not an abstract metaphysical notion” (7). It encouraged exploitation, dominance, subjugation, degradation and humiliation that took the form of a race caste structure which is in it corruption. The damaging impact of corruption on the continent and her people is monumental and cannot be over emphasized.

The stage for colonialism was set by slave trade through European capitalism, from the mercantile phase where

Africans; were sold as commodities alongside sugar, tobacco, gold, plantation etc into slavery, through the phase of industrial capitalism and with the subsequent scramble and partition for Africa and the era of classical colonialism to the current phase of financial capitalism. Africans are egalitarians by nature, selfless, kind, considerate, accommodating, loving, and contented. Then how be it that corruption has become one of the worst malaises and albatross that has plagued the continent? How is it that Africa's place on the corruption ladder is very high? These are important questions begging for critical answers.

This is a deviation from the norm wherein all accusing fingers point towards our leaders and/or socio-political structures as rotten and corrupt. This article does not want to tow the normal sing song or the hue and cry of African's being naturally corrupt as though corruption were indigenous to Africa or as if it is our way of life rather this discourse considers that argument preposterous, and sentimental and almost like a boring monotonous dirge all in a bid to discredit Africans and present them in very bad light before the global community.

This discourse takes exception to that negative and prejudiced toga of innate corruption hung on our neck by the West, rather, the paper takes liberty to re-echo Achebe's sagely admonition about finding out from where the rains started beating us.

It is the position of this article that one of the greatest legacies of colonialism on Africa is corruption. The

exploitation, oppression and dehumanization that were characteristic of colonialism has its debilitating and resultant effect on the physic, psychological and physical well being of the people. Colonialism remains the greatest form of corruption and the precursor of corruption. In fact, it is estimation of this discourse that the mother of corruption that begat all other forms of corruption is colonialism.

Colonialism weakened Africa culturally, economically, politically, socially, morally etc hence paving the lee way for the corruption and its consequences we suffer today. Capitalism as enunciated and practiced by the colonial overlords has been a fertile ground for corruption. The capitalist and exploitative ethos of colonialism has bequeathed corruption on a full scale upon Africa with all its negative attendant effects.

As canvassed earlier, corruption is a fall out of colonialism and all it stood for. There were various forms of colonialism as practiced in the different regions of Africa. The colonialism practiced in East Africa which led to the criminal and forceful displacement of the people from their land and the emasculation of the ancestral heritage of the people which led to social dislocations and the people in their bid to survive resorted to all manner of anti-social ills.

Even with the attainment of independence by African states, came neocolonialism and imperialism a newer form of slavery and capitalism which has further engendered corruption that is plaguing our continent.

It is important to state clearly that this discourse does not in any way justify or encourage corruption that is prevalent on the continent today but the way and manner the West and her allies have used corruption which they foisted upon us to mock and denigrate us is disheartening and not acceptable. As Ngugi Wa Thiongo argues, every writer is a writer in politics and because literature reflects the society from which it emanates, it cannot escape from the class and social structures that shape our everyday life. As a firm proponent of the relationship and the social relevance of the writer to the overall interest of his society, he throws more light in this regard when he contends that “Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflects one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society”.(xvi)

Similarly, in challenging western supremacy, Frantz Fanon a strident voice in this regard holds that:

History teaches us clearly that the battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism. For a very long time the native devotes his energies to ending certain definite abuses; forced labour, corporal punishment, inequality of salaries, limitation of political rights etc (30).

Corruption which many see as innate or traditional corruption is basically as a result of the mutilation and subjugation of the colonized people by the colonial regime. Fanon also argues that “...colonialism pulls every string shamelessly” (129). Perhaps this justifies the

postilion that corruption is a colonial legacy bequeathed to African nationalists, intellectuals, elites, new bourgeoisie, politicians, leaders, civil servants etc and since then corruption which is the bane of Africa's underdevelopment has not looked back. In fact, Fanon is very frontal and critical of colonialism, referring to it as a colonial war and mental disorder. He opines that :

But the war goes on; and we will have to bind up for years to cure the many, sometimes ineffaceable, wounds that the colonialist onslaught has inflicted on our people... That imperialism which today is fighting against a true liberation of mankind leave in its wake here and there tinctures of decay which we must search out and mercilessly expend from our land and our spirits. (200)

Fanon opines that colonialism in African has led to a mental and psychiatric phenomena entailing disorders, affecting behaviour and thoughts which needs to be cured. The crux of this paper is that corruption which is the bane of underdevelopment is a process that was birthed by slavery, colonialism and imperialism.

To this extent, it is apposite that we understand what underdevelopment is. Walter Rodney in his seminal work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* lampoons and holds Europe and the West responsible for Africa's backwardness and stunted growth. He views:

Underdevelopment not as the absence of development... it expresses a particular

relationship of exploitation: namely: the exploitation of one country by another. All of the countries named as ‘underdeveloped’ in the world are exploited by others; and the underdevelopment with which the world is now preoccupied is a product of capitalist, imperialist and colonialist exploitation (16-17).

He continues by saying the question as to who and what is responsible for African underdevelopment can be answered at two levels. Firstly, he argues that the operation of the imperialist system bears major responsibility for African economic retardation by draining African wealth and by making it impossible to develop more rapidly the resources of the continent and secondly, those who manipulate the system and those who are agents or accomplices of the said system.

Evaluating the Novels

Capitalism produced hoards of exploiters who are not sensitive to the suffering of the masses. Iortyer Terwase opines that Kenyan writers “... portrays in an illuminating manner the Kenyan people’s historic struggle against intrigues of domination right from the colonial through the neo-colonial period”(85). This condition is what has informed the artistic vision of most writers from East Africa such as Ngugi, Meja Mwangi and others. These novels are a searchlight not only of Kenyan society alone but also on Africa.

The dispossession and exploitation of the Gikuyu peasants are all products of corruption that gave rise to

the underdevelopment in the community. It is the consequences of this socio- historical legacy on the well-being of the people that Meja Mwangi exposes in *Going Down River Road and Kill Me Quick*. The difference between Ngugi's presentation of these conditions and that of Mwangi is that Ngugi couches his commentary in the letters of Marxist philosophy while Mwangi's is an x-ray of pathetic social conditions. Meja Mwangi in *Going Down the River Road and Kill me Quick*, presents the social consequences of corruption which manifested through capitalist exploitation.

Basically, the issue of dispossession of ancestral land is critical to East Africa and Kenya in particular. We are given various pictures of "disinherited inheritors of the Uhuru who are orphans, outcasts or urchins or even labourers toiling to amass wealth for the owners of multinational consortiums in Kenya. Given the one sided development which capitalism encourages, most African villages were underdeveloped, abandoned without the basic needs of life, while a few cities are developed. It is in such cities that modern facilities are restored and it is in them that the job seekers hope to find jobs.

The imbalances in the provision of social amenities lead to the migration of the youths to such cities where they could find what to do so as to survive. Meja and Maina in *Kill Me Quick* are examples of such migrants. They leave home armed with their academic qualifications and a hope that they would find befitting jobs. Once they get to town, they come face-to-face with contemporary social realities in Kenya. Meja and Maina's education have been academic; they have no practical skills to offer

a prospective employer. In despair, they try their hands at other alternatives which the conditions in society offer them. It is in the course of trying these other alternatives that they face another reality, the unpleasantness and ruin associated with the living conditions of poor people in an urban setting. This condition is in sharp contrast to the opulence and luxury of the rich.

The setting provides an adequate stage for our discussion on corruption and underdevelopment. The exploitation of the poor and the weak by the wealthy and the powerful is corruption at its peak which the result will be development to exploiters and underdevelopment to the exploited. This exploitation is portrayed, for example by the relationship between the white farmer, who employs Meja and Maina, and Boi, his black supervisor. It is also evident in the relationship of the labourers among who are Ben and Ocholla in *Going Down River Road*.

His use of the white man as the employer and blacks as either supervisors or labourers is symbolic. Mwangi introduced the main point of corruption and its attendant result which is underdevelopment as having roots in racial discrimination between the white and the black race. Racial discrimination is a major problem in contemporary Kenya. It is the lowly placed, unskilled blacks who are ultimately the losers since the whites harvest the fruit of their labour. In both novels, those whose skins are lighter in complexion are shown to have certain social advantages or privileges which those who are purely black do not have.

Some of the victims of the system are shown to succumb and accept their fate. Others try to rebel in various ways, but they ultimately fail as the experience of Meja and Maina reveals. The social system compels each class of the exploited Africans to devise means of survival. One of such emergent means of survival highlighted in both novels is prostitution. The female prostitutes in these novels use the weapon of their sex to get back at their own society; partly as a way of survival and partly as a way of expressing their anger towards an uncaring society. Examples of these are Delilah in *Kill Me Quick*, and Wini and the prostitutes of Karara centre in *Going Down River Road*.

Within this perverse social class we have the big time and petty criminals. A typical big time criminal is Razor. Meja and Maina, on the other hand start off as petty criminals but graduate into big time or habitual criminals. And in the course of that growth, they are shown to undergo significant metamorphoses out of their realization of the need for survival in an essentially hostile and uncaring society caused by corruption and exploitation of the whites. Their experiences illustrate the extent to which a corrupt society can condition the behavior or responses of the members of that society. For such criminals as those we find in Razor's camp, crime is the only option in a society where the nation's wealth is unequally distributed and where the overall welfare of the lower classes is not a government priority or concern. It is the attitude of the government, as presented in these novels that produces the hordes of juvenile delinquents who roam about the street looking

for a living from the droppings from the rich man's table.

Mwangi vividly describes with great compassion the misery and brutality which prostitutes of various ages undergo in their desperation for survival. The root of this prostitution is deprivation and exploitation. Wini, Ben's girlfriend in *Going Down River Road*, had a baby at the age of fourteen and was forced to take up prostitution in order to keep herself and the child because existentialism is a part of life. Although she eventually took up a job as secretary, the pains of keeping a home without adequate resources forced her to abandon her baby and elope with her white wealthy boss.

There is also the case of the sixteen year old prostitute in *Going Down River Road* who had sex with Ben in the same room as her room-mate who is at the same time engaging another man in a sexual act while her one month old baby screams inside a carton in a corner of the room. (127-129) This incidence is symbolic as it highlights the debasement and loss of moral values and the sanctity of womanhood all because of deprivation and extreme poverty. If their resources and means of livelihood had not been taken from them by the exploiters, they would not have resorted to this dishonorable and immoral act.

Mwangi shows Meja and Maina in *Kill me Quick* in a life cycle of poverty and struggle to survive despite their education. The educational system in Kenya is not left out the decay. The peasant families of Meja and Maina look up to education as the only way out of poverty. But

their children receive an education which removes them from their own cultural roots and offers those who fail rejection. This is because admission to the privileged ranks of the elite is ruthlessly selective. Meja and Maina the two main victims in *Kill Me Quick*, not only live in and on garbage cans, they are also the garbage of society.

A society which casually condemns the holders of the school certificates to the back streets or to labour on commercial farms or in the industrial sector, both of which offer no security and pitiful wages. In the case of Meja and Maina, education is not the key to the promise land of material prosperity and development; for these men, education offers no clue to economic or social survival or any measure of social identity in the urban jungle that they inhabit. The education given to them by the whites is that which leaves them without jobs and skills. They received an academically oriented schooling which leaves them jobless and bereft of any skills. They have no power to bargain since their certificates have been declared redundant and irrelevant; their more than one decade of schooling has only brought them to the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid.

To Boi, the old man sent by the white boss to recruit cheap labour and to the white boss himself, they are less than human. They are considered cheap and expendable commodities. Through the experience of Meja and Maina, we are made to feel the dehumanizing effects of a bad system on the dispossessed and the wretched in East Africa. Mwangi thus indirectly indicts the educational system that throws Meja and Maina unto the back seat.

Both young men became rebels in a society that is hostile and uncaring because of exploitation and dispossession of their means of livelihood. Their sporadic gesture of defiance in both novels are as a result of the economic exploitation which left them and the society underdeveloped.

Of what use is education if it cannot put good food on your table? The malaise of corruption and retrogression in *Kill Me Quick* and *Going Down River Road* shows that the moral life of youths in post independent African nations would have been much better if the social and economic circumstances were conducive to their existence. But corruption has made the cities to be characterized by poverty, violence and insecurity. The novels paint a grim picture of the future which may be populated by mentally deranged people as a result of the violence done to their psyche by the socio-political and economic system in operation.

Ben in *Going Down River Road* is a victim of dehumanizing circumstances. The insecurity and violence the people suffer in the hands of these vampires are enormous. And this is aggravated even by the fact that they cannot seek protection from the law-enforcement agency. The police is always in alliance with the privileged class in assaulting and brutalizing the oppressed. The case of the vegetable hawker, in *Going Down River Road*, whose property is thrown out as he faces eviction and has to sit by the road side with his wife and six children, all of them weeping, does not only arouse our sympathy, but also projects the oppression and callousness prevalent in the society.

Going Down River Road also highlights what Eustace Palmer Calls “housing rackets” a common feature of the contemporary African problem. The situation in that sleek and well fed landlords who parade their exotic cars, construct ramshackle houses which they let out to the unfortunate people in the lower income group at exorbitant rents. This is also corruption against the poor in a higher order. People will look at corruption only when the poor will be indebted to the landlord or even look for a way of killing the landlord to avoid paying this high rent. Corruption is not only when the poor mounts a road block to rob or steal from the rich landlord in-order to pay his rent. The following lines explicate the landlord-tenant relationship in Kenya:

...Across the courtyard stands the hateful epicene landlord, a bunch of goat locks in his hand. His eviction committee, a bunch of part-time criminals... since he raised the house rent the landlord has to call regularly with his ... to help unwilling tenants into the street (134).

The argument here is that exploitation is the precursor of corruption and people turn to corrupt practices for existentialism and as a way of survival. Most corrupt practices are not inborn in Africans but in a situation where the society has given you more than you bargain for, you have nothing else to do than to resort to corrupt practices as a means of finding a living.

Mwangi uses the construction of the luxurious twenty-five story house “development house” to further highlight the exploitation which the ordinary people

face, while huge sums of money and human recourse is being expended on the erection of this house, the people who labour to build it continue to live in squalor. The builders are hunted by a sense of insecurity. They build to complete the house but the completion of the house would mean unemployment for them. The irony is that this is a negation of what the house, “the development house” should represent. They build the houses, but live in shanties. As Eustace Palmer puts it, “It symbolizes the indifference of the authorities to the sufferings of the masses while the corruption of the politicians, and police, the inequalities of the system and the high cost of living help to accentuate” (317).

Meja Mwangi in these novels comments on the various dimensions of corruption and underdevelopment in East Africa and Africa in general, namely; exploitation by the people in power, non- functional education which creates unemployment, dimensions of unpleasantness caused exploitation which result to poverty and underdevelopment of the people and the environment.

Essentially, this treatise submits that corruption has like a canker worm eaten deep into the fabric of Africa and has in no small way, played a major role in the underdevelopment of Africa which has remained the bane of the continent's backwardness. As a responsive art, African literature has always been in the vanguard of enlightenment, social change and re-engineering and the two novels under study: *Kill me Quick* and *Going Down River Road*, have been used as veritable canvasses to articulate the malaise of corruption and underdevelopment which are like siamese twins.

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