

International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)
Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 5(3), S/No 18, June, 2016:263-273

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v5i3.22>

**The Novelist and Social Commitment: A Study of Meja
Mwangi's *The Bushtrackers***

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Abstract

Meja Mwangi is one of the literary giants who have emerged in the literary scene of Kenya. His works have however, not received much critical attention the way the works of, for instance, Ngugi have. The study has therefore, brought to limelight Mwangi's literary prowess as a socially committed writer of his time and space. As a socially committed writer, Mwangi explores the social ills that were associated with colonial Africa and the ones that are inherent in the post-independence contemporary African society. In his *The Bushtrackers*, Mwangi captures the traumatic existence of Africans even though independence has been achieved. His main worry is that all is not well with African continent despite independence. The study therefore, concludes that until the psychological traumas that have brought pains and sufferings to the people of Africa are surmounted by our so-called leaders, true African peaceful existence, progress and above all, human happiness, will continue to remain a mirage ad infinitum.

Key words: Social commitment, neo-colonialism.

Introduction

African continent has been bedeviled by much sufferings and social ineptitudes as occasioned by her contact with colonialism. In this context, even though colonialism has been brought to an end, the continent's myriad problems are still rearing their ugly heads, especially as those who are saddled with the mantle of leadership after the departure of the colonialists, are performing more negatively than the colonialists, even worst thereby ushering in the neo-colonial era. Being that our black African brothers and sisters have assumed leadership positions, their followers have been permanently subjugated to a complete state of oppression, suppression, retrogression and exploitation whose resultant effects have been gross corruption in the continent.

The conditions of living within the African continent are made unfavourable by the unscrupulous and draconian acts of our so-called leaders. In spite of the sufferings that Africa has been made to go through, there is this sit-tight syndrome that is characteristic of her leaders, which invariably make matters worse, and the African atmosphere becoming on a daily basis, a breeding ground for great social inequality and gross inhuman treatment, thus, giving our leaders the attribute of being brutish in their attitudes towards the led.

Against this premise, African writers have in their various literary works, tried to unravel the mysteries surrounding this inglorious African situation. The contemporary 21st century African writers therefore, have in addition to the x-raying of the social evils that characterised the monster known as colonialism, taken it upon themselves to have the herculean task of bringing to limelight, the dastardly deeds of Africa's bourgeois class who lord themselves over those whom they lead.

Thus, leadership within the African continent is one phenomenon that gives leaders the glaring opportunity of strangulating the economic, social and political wellbeing of the African people. These leaders are quite less concerned about the welfare of the generality of the masses, and more concerned about swelling their pockets and bank accounts, together with those of their family members and close associates to the detriment of the downtrodden of the society.

Mwangi, who is one of the socially committed writers that we have in Africa, makes it a point of duty to use literature as a weapon towards the interrogation of the acts of our African leaders. In this praxis, African writers use African literature as a voice of conveying the negative vignettes that confront the continent of Africa.

The Writers and their Community/Environment

Writers in their respective communities and environments, write to impact positively on especially, the downtrodden of the society, who are totally denied some essentials by their society, due largely to the doings of those who lead them. Writers

are therefore, a voice for such neglected and rejected people of whatever community/environment they belong to.

In carrying out this all important role of serving as the mouthpiece to such category of persons as shown above, the writers in every society are seen to perform a dual task in their chronicling endeavours. First and foremost, the writers use their writing according to Bronze Level as “the vehicle for expressing his emotions, flashes of humour, commentaries on life and the follies of humankind” (250). And in addition to the above traditional role or task of the writers, they are readily made available as the mediators between the oppressed and the oppressor in a socially dehumanised human society. It is in this light that L.O. Bamidele avers that,

Artists become more sensitive of their roles depending on the nature of society in which they operate. For instance, modern writers who are touched by the stigmata of modern consciousness in terms of social disintegration, in terms of cultural decadence and in terms of the widening chasm between the individual and his moral material environment see their roles as that of redeemers and their art as a redeeming agent. They make statements that are very succinct, or implicit, about their desire to reach towards a metaphor of desirable wholeness through their art (29).

Discussing writers on a general note, Richard Abcarian and Marvin Klotz write that “writers turn to the essay form when they wish to confront their readers directly with an idea, a problem (often with a proposed solution), an illuminating experience, an important definition, some flaw (or virtue) in the social system” (194). This is quite indicative of the fact that the writers do all the above mentioned in their literary works in order to have an effective communication with the members of their communities/environments with the sole aim of keeping them abreast of the socio-economic and political happenings of their time and space. By doing this, they consciously or unconsciously work on the sub-conscious minds of the people whom their writings are targeted to impact upon. Their writings therefore, serve as a tool for checkmating the working of those who are saddled with the responsibility of running the society, and those who are involved in the act of governance. Thus, they more often than not, write to correct the perceived or felt ills of the society that have been occasioned by its rulers, in order that the society/community becomes a better place for all and sundry.

A Literature with a Socially Committed Intent

Every literature in every human society is indeed a socially committed one as it is readily made available in the hands of writers as a weapon that helps in keeping the society on its toes, as they try fervently to right the wrongs in their communities.

In a discussion that dwells on a socially committed literature, which can otherwise be seen as literature with a social vision, Wole Soyinka writes that:

A creative concern which conceptualises or extends actuality beyond the purely narrative, making it reveal realities beyond the immediately attainable, a concern which upsets orthodox acceptances in an effort to force society of historical or other superstitions, these are qualities possessed by literature of a social vision (66).

Still, commenting on the essence why a literature can be considered as being a socially committed tool which writers use to depict in their literary works, how socially committed they can be onto the society in which they find themselves, Abimbola Shittu succinctly corroborates that:

The main concern of the socially committed artist is to see a change in the structure of the society and an eradication of the social ills that plague the society. He therefore, works relentlessly to ensure that these problems are seen in their right perspectives, apprehended totally and presented to the public as the bane of the society (121).

From the excerpt above, it is quite obvious that the writers' role in the society is more of being watchdogs of the society than being just entertainers of the people with their stories. The main corpus of such writers' writing is essentially to checkmate the doings that are inherent in their society that can possibly be seen as affecting the entire society negatively and possibly too, proffering of solutions to such perceived problems that confront their society.

In the same vein, L.O. Bamidele writes of a socially committed writer in the following lines:

Since the writer writes as an eye witness or as a participant in the event as it occurred, what he produces then maybe 'faction' where real and fictitious people are simultaneously created. This is to me the heart of theorising on the text and social history. It produces texts that are strong in social description with such other random events and elements that make up a particle of history such as domestic life, fashion and opinions (71).

The above is suggestive of the fact that the writer is chiefly a custodian of the historical antecedents of his people, and is in a better position to prophesy to his people, having had a careful examination of the past and the present, as to what is to be in the foreseeable future of his generation. The writer therefore, can also be seen in this direction as playing the role of a prophet in a society that is characterised by much social decadence.

In yet another instance as to who a socially committed writer is, David Ker categorically states that:

The writer's role as a social critic is a logical sequence to his role as a teacher. Having repaired the foundations of his society by establishing the validity of African traditions, the writer can now afford to take an unflinching look at his society and its shortcoming (90).

Here, Ker deviates a bit as he concentrates his concern of one being a socially committed writer to just the African writer, who he strongly feels that, by the time an African writer writes so as to uphold the cultural tenets of the African society and also expose the socio-economic and political panorama of his people at a particular time, such a writer qualifies to be referred to as a socially committed writer. Comparatively, this is where African literature differs from for instance, European literature where most times in European literature, what you find is an appraisal of nature, instead of a strong expression of the social panorama that confronts the people.

Synopsis of the Text

Meja Mwangi's *The Bushtrackers* is one literary master piece that is characterised by powerful gangsterism, intrigues, blackmail, gun-running and assassinations. It reveals in its entirety, the story of naturalised America's link with a Mafia organisation that specialises in poaching Kenyan wild-life potentials. Married to a Swahili woman, Mimi, Al Haji establishes an Estate, Orange Estate in the outskirts of Nairobi that smells criminal opulence where he oversees the shady interest deals of his Italian power magnate and affluence, the Delorie family.

Al Haji with his henchmen (poachers) armed to the teeth, poach Kenyan forest in the quest for elephant tusks, leopard skins, lion skins and smuggle marijuana abroad to his international allies and in return, he retains the Orange Estate and a percentage of the financial accrument. Backed up, and their actions triggered by Al Haji's bulldog support, the poachers who also doubled as assassins, systematically and insidiously destroy Kenya's wild-life and consequently, the Kenyan economy. In addition to these dastardly acts, as if such acts are not enough trouble for the people of Kenyan, Al Haji runs an extortionist gang that brings doom to the whole of Nairobi and particularly residents of Gragon Road and River Road. John Kimathi, Uncle Eater, the only living relative and his wife, Sofia are three persons who are the major sufferers of the extortionist acts.

Polemics of the Text

The *Bush trackers* is a novel that deals particularly with themes of social injustice, social corruption, social oppression, social neglect, social deprivation of fundamental human right and death. As a socially committed writer, who does not

mince words in his exposition of the doings of the status-quo, Mwangi offers an insight into the theme of social injustice which dwells on the law itself and those who enforce it. This insight into the theme of social injustice shows that those who enforce the law are not unconnected to such dastardly acts of these criminals called poachers and their international cohorts. Of this sort of thing, Mwangi writes that “you notice the number of good lawyers turning up in the defence of captured poachers. You spend a whole night hunting down an armed gangster and then they let him out on a stupid technicality” (51).

The above gives a vivid picture of the fact that as far as social justice is concerned, the people are deprived of it, since of course, when these people (the poachers) are caught and taken to court instead of the law taking its course on them, are allowed to go scot free as the law too and its enforcement agents are in league with the perpetrators of these acts.

Al Haji who is a naturalised Kenyan citizen, lives a life full of affluence. He lives this type of life out of the destruction he causes on Kenyan wild life, which is of course, detrimental to the Kenyan economy. From the very beginning of *The Bushtrackers*, we are led into Al Haji’s study, a part of his Orange Estate, to see the type of affluence that envelops it.

In a sharp contrast, Mwangi depicts the sort of living abode that is inhabited by John Kimathi and Frank Burkell. Despite the fact that these two strive so much to prevent the poachers from annihilating Kenyan wild life as game rangers, they are still not given the best in terms of their living conditions. This brings to mind the theme of social neglect. This atmosphere is captured by Mwangi thus:

Lali Hills Rangers’ Station was a cluster of wooden houses at the bottom of western slopes of Lali Hills. The rangers’ houses, about ten of them, were huddled around the administration block as if to protect them from the westerly wind that buffeted the post day and night. The walls were black and the roof green. They were small, one roomed houses, just big enough for the rangers most of whom were single (56).

From the above, one cannot help but only to feel repugnant about the deplorable condition that the bush trackers or better still, game-rangers who toil day and night in defence of their country’s wild life, have been subjected to. In a related development, this same government that shows little or no concern about the living conditions of the rangers still does not care a little about the death of the rangers. This means that the life of the rangers means little or nothing as far as they are concerned (the government). Thus, there is a discernible social neglect on the part of the government even when such rangers die while in active service for their father land. A case in question is the type of attitude displayed by a team of reporters who are but a representative of the

government. This attitude shows a clear case of despise. Of this theme of social neglect, Mwangi observes:

In all this excitement of Daniel Bokasi's unfortunate demise was given a six line paragraph in only one of the newspapers. The ambush, the cause of grass fire, faded away into background, and Frank Burkell, the game ranger who survived miraculously, was mentioned as having been at the scene of the fire (178).

The above points to the insensitive posture of the government about the lives of the bush trackers. This of course, shows that they are given the most inhuman treatment, as no one sympathises with them.

Still, the theme of social injustice filters through the novel, as the police simply dismisses a case of murder with the wave of the hand. Since the police too gains from the loots of this syndicate, there is of course, no way they could temper justice with mercy. Mwangi in his usual way of being a socially committed writer depicts this unscrupulous attitude of the police that "the police had told him there were no witnesses, no finger prints, no suspects" (185).

The above shows how hostile the society is. It also portrays the fact that a poor man has no place in the society where the order of the day is corruption through social injustice. The death of Sofia, Kimathi's wife, means nothing to the police. And so they will simply do anything possible to protect the interest of the unscrupulous behaviour from the wicked.

Being in league with security agents in the mainstream and the custom officials, Al Haji and his gang of extortionists and looters, are able to carry out these shady, dirty deals uninterrupted. Thus, the neighbourhood of especially Grogan Road is left in the mercy of these bandits. Mwangi through Uncle Eater depicts this fact:

You can't go to the police, that's all. Others tried to resist, Johnny. Two shops mysteriously burned to the ground, others were raided into bankruptcy, and a few people got maimed in senseless holdups. Now everyone pays. These men are ruthless and the police can do nothing, don't you understand? (104)

The above gives us a feeling of what the plight of these people is like. They had better not take their case to the police, since such will only fall on deaf ears. Most times, the police are instrumental to the successful execution of this extortionist trend by gangsters. They however do this for a reward; call it wind fall, and so they are often not in the knowing of the activities of bandits.

Mwangi by way of this socially committed writing portrays that it is not only the police that is usually involved in the looting of the poor, but also the government

itself. This revelation in his portrayal brings to mind and to the fore, the theme of social corruption which Mwangi posits that “At seven Al Haji and Mimi came out of the house in evening cloths. They were on their way to dine with some government officials, including a cabinet minister and a high-ranking police officer” (109).

Kenya like most African countries is one country that social corruption has eaten deep into the fabrics of the nation’s economy. Corruption in all its inglorious ramifications is seen manifesting in *The Bustrackers*. Al Haji normally succeeds in his ‘business’ exploits due to the co-operation he gets from top customs and immigration officers across the border. Of this sort of social corruption in such quarters, Mwangi writes that “A better load of arms than you would expect to come across the border from Somalia and Ethiopia. If you ask me, this hardware is coming through our ports under the eyes of duped customs officer” (151). This gives us room to have an insight into the attitude of government officials and representatives who simply do nothing to stop corrupt practices as they are serving as facilitating agents towards the smooth running of activities that have bearing with the acts of social corruption.

The residents of Grogan Road and River Road are deprived socially of the right to own and operate shops by this group of Manhunts-Kuria and his henchmen. As we can see, defaulters who fail in their obligation of a weekly or monthly illegal payment of money for protection, their shops are wrecked and most times, burnt or reduced to the ground.

As he crosses the River Road, Kimathi found a huge crowd watching the furiously burning Shah drapers while the fire brigade stood helplessly back. The shops burnt like a rag soaked in petrol, belching huge tongues of flame and clouds of black smoke into the air, threatening the shops to the left and right of it (151).

The activities of the hoodlums and nincompoops reach a peak as both Uncle Eater and his nephew’s wife, Sofia are killed at last. They die due to the callous and brutal treatment which they receive from them. In one of such episodes, Mwangi reports, “...Kuria struggled to shake him off without letting go off the woman. One of the henchmen stepped forward and swung the length of pipe he had been carrying hard against the old man’s skull. Uncle Eater dropped like a sack of potatoes off Kuria’s back and lay still” (182). Sofia too is not left out in this final deadly raid. As the scuffle that ensues between the killer squad and Uncle Eater intensifies, Sofia innocently comes questioningly, oblivious of what her question will cause her. She therefore lands herself in the death trap. As the squad succeeds in eliminating the old man’s life, Kuria turns his snake-like eyes and attention to Sofia. Of this theme of death, Mwangi captures:

Kuria grabbed her by her neck, choking her, and covered her mouth with one hand. She bit him he swore and released her. As she opened her mouth to scream again, he spun her round and slammed his fist into her tummy. She gagged, doubled up and fell, knocking her head hard against a shelf and past out (183).

Death thus becomes a phenomenon that haunts even the lives of the bandits, as they are seen dead. Al Haji together with his group of blood-thirsty and trigger happy henchmen are reduced to nothingness by John Kimathi and Frank Burkell.

In showing that he is totally and socially committed as a writer towards the exposition of the plight of the Kenyan people, Mwangi uses form as a vehicle to arrive at the aforementioned thematic preoccupations. As far as his use of form is concerned in this novel, Mwangi mostly makes use of metaphorical expressions. The essence of this is to portray inevitable pessimism that haunts especially the bush trackers- John Kimathi and Frank Burkell in their efforts to thwart off the activities of the poachers. In this respect, we notice particularly expressions such as "... and as the evening wind whistles through the flat-topped thorn trees, the cold sets in; a sharp cold that burns the ears and penetrates the bone marrow" (46), "As the first ray of the orange sun peeped over the distant Wachu hills, they arrived at Omara waterhole" (55), "Outside, the wind whistles southwards through the torn trees. Far in the park, hyenas laughed at the low calling birds from over the hills, jackals cackled and lions growled" (168), "Night birds call at each other from across the plain, and hungry cats stalked sleepy gazelles" (77).

Due to Mwangi's love for Nairobi and because of the way Nairobi is being discarded by the same people who bask so much under her euphoria, Mwangi also uses metaphorical language to show the type of crippling pessimism that awaits Nairobi. Of this sort of use of metaphorical expression, he writes, "Nairobi is just an opening; everyone glad to use her, sing praises to her beauty, her conveniences, while loudly denying owning her any loyalty. Nairobi, throbbing and writhing ecstatically with crowds by day and miserably lonely by night, lying quietly down to await another reawakening" (148).

Mwangi also uses language in such a way that images are used to describe situations that captivate our sympathy for the bush trackers as they try in their efforts to track down the poachers. We therefore, notice particularly expressions such as "...their eyes sparkling amber and blue like diamonds" (10), "The suddenness of a powerful gun fire splits the sudden dawn like a thundering earthquake, echoing inside the ears and all over the hills" (173).

As part of his form, Mwangi makes use of sensual language in his *The Bushtrackers*. The use of this type of language therefore, becomes an effective means through which he gives a perfect description of love scene between John Kimathi and

Sofia, and particularly, a presentation of Africa in the image of a woman. In his use of language in portraying the two love birds, he writes:

Sofia snaked her hand inside his shirt and caressed his chest. His hand found its way inside her blouse and curbed her firm, warm breast. She clung to him. He clutched her to his chest and left her there.... her mouth cling to his, her teeth nibbling on his lips. Her hands slithered down his stomach and unzipped his trousers, then reached inside and grabbed his hardness in her warm hands. A soft moan escaped her. Blood boiled in Kimathi's head, his chest crying for more oxygen (78).

Mwangi is though noticed as a sensualist, this is used to create an effect. The effect is that he succeeds in presenting the beauty of an African woman, who though beautiful, is forced by the decadent nature of the society, and the compelling forces of a corrupt society to go into prostitution which is of course, the last resort. Of this sort of effect, Mwangi presents, "...those street girls who could afford the price of drink drifted to the bar to display their wares: long black legs, bared shoulders and only particularly covered breast. With their shifty massacred eyes, they invited the safari-drunk tourists to sample the true African delight" (148).

Conclusion

From the proceeding pages of this study, it is quite glaring that the study has registered the fact that Meja Mwangi is one of the socially committed writers who has emerged in the continent of Africa, and who is strongly charged with the responsibility of x-raying the social, economic and political panorama that confront his people at every given time.

The study has demonstrated the fact that Mwangi does not mince words in his exposition of the diseases that have become more or less, social maladies that brought about great moral decadence to the people of Kenya in particular and Africa in general. Mwangi stops at nothing in his careful tackling of the evils that have brought or have put African continent in a complete moribund state for centuries.

Mwangi as a socially committed writer seeks to be adequately objective in his presentation and representation of Kenyan situation in both the past and the present. The backdrop to *The Bushtrackers* from the perspective that Mwangi presents it before us, is a capitalist society and the social contradictions therein, are in the mainstream, socio-economic and political.

Finally, his choice of appropriate diction in passing his message across, to match with the issues discussed in the novel as well as the immediacy of actions experienced, are all geared towards a total conviction of the readers of the truths that his facts carry with them. It then follows that the things that Mwangi writes about in

this novel at the time it was written, are still very much with us in the contemporary African society and are likely to be there tomorrow, hence, his pessimistic posture. Indeed, he writes from a socially committed perspective, hence, his simplicity of language becomes the hallmark of his erudite writing. This informs why Ebele Eko writes of him that,

Like his mentor, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Mwangi is deeply rooted in Kenyan soil, for his country's socio-political problems before and after independence remain perennial concerns as a writer. Like Ngugi also, Mwangi explores without apologies, the dynamics of the Mau Mau revolt before turning attention to what he describes as the various social problems such as crime, unemployment and economic depression which have arisen from the attempt to modernize post-independence Kenya. (182)

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