Epidemic of Postcolonial Woes: Meja Mwangi's *Striving for the Wind* and The Trouble with Africa

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Abstract

African literature has an innate and functional quality of reflecting and refracting socio-political issues. This commitment has been negotiated through various artistic means. In this paper, an attempt is made to examine the depiction of neocolonial woes in the contemporary African novel. Meja Mwangi's Striving for the Wind *is used as the launching pad of the discussion. The paper critically investigates Mwangi's verisimilar portrayal of man's plight in neocolonial Kenya, in particular, and the entire postcolonial Africa, in general. It is established that Mwangi, in the novel, patronizes the aesthetics of humanism and depicts, with harrowing contempt and withering derision, the existing exploitative reality and its structure of values in postcolonial Kenya. The novel also reveals that Mwangi has an acute sense of social responsibility and makes a pungent exposition of the brutality of a menacing social order. Besides, it is discovered that, in the novel, Mwangi shifts his thematic focus to rural poverty as a respite from the urban poverty discussed in his earlier novels. In conclusion, the paper observes that the uniqueness of Mwangi's discourse of postcolonial woes lies on the adroit blend of thematic preoccupations and narrative techniques.*

African literature is a utilitarian art. It is a means of codifying societal and existential experiences on the continent. Jude Agho declares that the novel, as the dominant genre of African literature, has been used by many African writers to document the political and social experiences of Africa (Agho 1995, 23). This accounts for the legion seeds of disillusionment, dissociation, alienation, dissonance and pain in the contemporary African novel. This view is also corroborated by Huma Ibrahim who claims that the African novel has "transformed the theme of disillusionment" (Ibrahim, 85). Actually, the contemporary African novelist always prioritizes the neo-rationalist convention, which centers on historical and social investigation. Aderemi Bamikunle states that the contemporary African novel is noticeably concerned with social and political issues. In his words, "it is widely accepted by literary critics that each work of art finds inspiration in the historico-social realities in which the author finds himself" (Bamikunle, 73). This is similar to the opinion of Mineke Schipper that the problem of human relationships in the contemporary world "is not ahistorical...and cannot be understood without the solid background knowledge of the cultures of origin" (Schipper, 8). This is to claim that the contemporary world novel reflects and refracts the socio-historical issues of its enabling society. Wole Ogundele also shares the view that African literature has an innate and functional capacity to intervene in everyday life (Ogundele, 125).

Consequently, the development of the East African novel has been moving along socially committed lines. In Kenya, for instance, we have what can be termed novels of crisis, which imaginatively chronicle the turbulent nature of events in the society. The common denominator in the novels from the region is the helplessness of the downtrodden. The novelists always turn to the neo-colonial problems of their nations as a quarry for their thematic foci. They respond to the disappointment of the masses and strive for authenticity and legitimacy by identifying with the oppressed.

The context of the novel is so hostile that one can be tempted to call the temper of the novelists "Afro–pessimism". Mwangi is one of such postcolonial Kenyan writers whose novels dwell on the contemporary situations in their milieus and who try to anchor prose fiction within all layers of society. Commenting on why the East African novel is socially committed, G.D Killam declares:

> The novel was born as a response to a social world that has lost unity of itself, and the role of the nationalist novelist was to confer some order on his experiences by creating a new image of himself and his world. With the failure of independence, most novelists conditioned their works to their abject social conditions and became trapped in the state of stasis they set their novels in (Killam, 240).

In fact, the average contemporary East African novelist uses his art to expose the malaise of his society. He sees his art as a veritable weapon for depicting the neo-colonial dissonance and pains in his society. Disenchantment with and betrayal of hopes by the ruling class in Kenya have found persistent expression in most of the Kenyan writings. The contemporary East African novelist, according to Lewis Nkosi, "lays bare the new strains and tensions of African society" (Nkosi, 55).

The world of Mwangi's fiction is infested with unmitigated bleakness. This is an absolute and intense presentation of woes recurring one after the other in the society of the underdogs without clear traces of relief or hope. Throughout most of his novels, especially in *Carcase for Hounds* and *Striving for the Wind*, where the word "pain" is foregrounded by its appearance on many pages, there exists no softening of the tragically charged tone. Mwangi's vision is a "grim view of a doomed society" (Gakwandi, 159); the social injustices of (neo)colonialism constitute the driving dynamic in his novels. He selects facts from ordinary life, and his novels chronicle the fate

of an impotent silent majority. He has a vision of life as Hell. His fiction often betrays his liberal humanism. The class, racial and gender inequality remains largely gestural in the novels. Therefore, when thinking of Mwangi's fiction, a set of characteristics springs to mind: an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, the painful, and a common insistence on the archaic self.

Striving for the Wind, Mwangi's ninth novel, is a hilarious, yet subtly disturbing, portrayal of postcolonial decadence. It is a continuation of the fictional exploration of the conflicts, contradictions and painful existence treated in his previous novels. However, in this novel, Mwangi shifts his focus to rural poverty as a respite from the urban poverty discussed in his preceding novels. The setting is Kambi village, a highly deprived Kenyan rural community: "From Kambi Village a dust road wound its ways up the hill past numerously wretchedly shambas"(1). The villagers suffer from illiteracy, bad habitation, lack of infrastructural facilities, and the like. The novel shows the corrosive effects of corruption and dehumanization which have become a conventional way of life in the society of Mwangi's fiction. The level of intra-and-inter-class dissonance and the intensity of exploitation, signified by deceit, confusion, alienation and marginalization of the masses, is also explored. It gives a bleak picture of the lacuna between the rich and the poor - an exposition of the exploitation of the labor of the downtrodden peasants, represented by Mutiso, the goatherd, who is engaged in a soul-destroying, exhausting and degrading job. Baba Pesa is a newly wealthy black landowner, who constantly boasts he is "the Father of Money". He is described as the largest, richest man on the hill of Kambi (3). He is brutish and ruthless, and clashes with family, friends and neighbors as he craves financial dominance in the region. The novel is also critical of the brutality of the security agents, most especially the police force. This is a recurring theme in postcolonial African literature.

In the novel, Mwangi exposes the misdeeds of the neocolonial rulers and the emerging 'nouveaux riches', and the disillusionment that follows independence in most African nations. He depicts, with harrowing contempt and withering derision, the existing exploitative reality and its structure of values in postcolonial Africa .His disenchantment with the compromised postcoloniality in Africa is undisguised. Thus, in the text, Mwangi is a critical realist like T. M. Aluko, V.S. Naipaul, Festus Iyayi and Sembene Ousmane. He practices the truth-of-fact theory of critical reproduction. A powerful humanist-satirist, Mwangi captures the different phases and faces of Kenyan life in the throes of neocolonial oppression. The novel therefore makes the reader realize the fact that independence brought with it an increase in the status and wealth of politicians, business magnates and government officials, and corresponding decrease in those of the masses who languish in poverty. This is portrayed in the living conditions of Baru and his family, who represent the masses that are downtrodden and Baba Pesa and his family who are the archetypal rich members of the society. The story imaginatively captures the exploitation, humiliation and degradation of the transient or casual laborers in African countries, the likes of Baru and Mutiso.The following scene captures the plight of the laborers:

> From nearly half a kilometre up the road, Baba Pesa watched their laboured progress and brushed his teeth furiously with the chewing stick he had sent Mutiso, the goatherd, half-way across the Laikipia Plains to fetch .He had made him beat it into submission on top of the old engine block behind the old barns (2).

Also, in the novel, Mwangi attacks the economic structure and the operators of the system, positing that there is an urgent need for the mobilization of the masses so that a new society founded on egalitarianism

and mutual love can emerge. To Juda, the intelligent but disillusioned son of Baba Pesa who is also the mouthpiece of Mwangi in the novel, the success of this mobilization can only be achieved by the organized peasants, proletarians and other progressive forces whose consciousness has grown in leaps and bounds. This is achievable because a people subjected to barefaced brutality, criminal oppression, ghettoization and acute degradation by an insincere ruling class are bound to react. Juda, in his public lectures, keeps on motivating the masses to rise and fight for their freedom; he leads the struggles to better the lot of the masses by organizing public campaigns, thereby constituting a pressure group to fight the oppressors in his society.

The novel portrays the lower classes as providers of cheap labors that can be exploited and dumped. Their wives and daughters are the sex objects of the overfed and shameless members of the dominant class. Mwangi uses the plights of Baru's wife (Mama Baru) and his daughter (Wangari) to exemplify this observation. In all cases, the exploited suffer all manners of losses arising from their relationship with the affluent people. Through his use of contrast, description and mock drama, sandwiched within the main plot, Mwangi shows us two social worlds - the world of the rich and that of the poor. The poverty of the latter group is as unbelievably deep-rooted as it is tormenting and saddening. Mwangi also uses the novel to consistently attack capitalism in Africa, for its unsettling political, economic and cultural effects. There is an all-pervading tone of anti-neocolonial protest in the novel. It equally reflects Mwangi's desire to use art as a medium for mobilizing the African masses to band together with a view to resisting their oppression by the ruling elite, as well as to preaching a redirection of African societal values. The specific concern is woven around an ideological principle, which is essentially naturalist and subtly socialist realist because it prescribes the mass mobilization of all the oppressed as a condition for dethroning the oppressor class and dismantling the social

hierarchies in the system.

In essence, the novel looks at the present in the light of the future setting. According to Angela Smith, the contemporary Kenyan novel satirically denounces and critiques the neocolonial Kenyan society in order to envision a socialist Kenya purged of neo-colonialism (29). Mwangi highlights the vices of the capitalists in his society. The capitalists are typified by Baba Pesa, the industrialist, the brute and the landowner, having three hundred acres of prime farmland. Yet, he is not content with his lot; he still covets the meager plot of land owned by his poverty-stricken neighbor, Baru. It takes the political and philosophical maneuvering of Juda, the center of consciousness in the text, to dissuade his father from his exploitative tendencies. Juda, in this prose work, is used as the revolutionary symbol of the African masses. A ventriloquist for Mwangi, Juda takes to teaching his fellow villagers on the need to fight for their freedom. He constitutes a force in the society to influence the society as well as the government agencies. Thus, Juda and his group seek to influence the neocolonial rulers to change their policies and procedures for the benefit of the common man.

It is not gainsaying the fact to claim that *Striving for the Wind* is a realistic novel whose comic aspects merely serve to heighten its objective depiction of contemporary Kenyan realities. It is also a lampoon of the colonialist education that needs maximal structural reforms, and it satirizes religion as being the opium of the people. That is, the church is depicted as an agent of the ruling class. Christianity is described in the text as the "original mumbo jumbo... strange and mysterious"(79). In the novel, Mwangi writes an effective satire on the Kenyan socio-economic system and delineates a typical representative of the emergent bourgeoisie. He discusses many of the big problems of the Kenyan society with great understanding. There is a swift flow of painful and dissonant actions from the beginning to the end of the novel. The novelist holds the reader in suspense at

different points of the story. Perhaps, the most impressive point of suspense in the novel is the outcome of the manifold of problems bedeviling Baba Pesa towards the end of the story.

In the novel, the focus alternates between what is happening between men and women, between different generations and between dissonant social classes. Each of these sets of 'warring' human relationships is explored with engrossing authenticity or at least recognizable plausibility. Personal human issues swamp the actions at times, while at others, they absorb and swell with unbearable irony due to the ever-lurking socio-political setting. Mwangi also uses the novel to depict the complex nature of human relationships, full of sexual lust and concupiscence, in African postcolonial societies. The text describes a world full of tension and pain. Although the dissonance and pain are toned down by Mwangi's use of humor, the reader is not left in doubt about the sordid conditions of the masses in a neocolonial African setting. The dissension is perceived from various angles: social, ideological, interpersonal and inter-gender. The pains of living are also multidimensional; they come in the form of assault and insult, dispossession, untimely death, frustration, betrayal, disappointment, natural disaster, failure, loss, woe, foe, tear, fear and drought.

Like the rest of Mwangi's novels, *Striving for the Wind* directly expresses the common experiential and historical matrix of Kenya, an age of instability, great foreboding, stress and absurdity. The text presents the reader with images and evocations of a corrupt, degrading, painful and brutal world, which is quite recognizably the neocolonial African society. The story foregrounds the primeval gulf, the abyss, the void, the chthonic powers and cosmic conflicts - all signifying the storm center of chaos in contemporary African society. Mwangi, in the novel, thus represents the intelligent conscience of his society. The dehumanization of Baru and other suffering masses and the blatant luxury of Baba Pesa and his fellow oppressors are sharply contrasted with a view to

showing the glaring social inequalities in the society. The laborers are not well paid; they therefore have to resort to begging for salary advances. For instance, Mutiso gets "a salary of nearly three hundred shillings a month. But after buying sugar, tea and tobacco, the three things he couldn't do without, there was no money left for maize flour let alone milk"(3).

Mwangi's descriptions of ordinary African life are marked by the hurt sense of deprivation. This has an effect on the sharpness of his satire on the irresponsible exercise of wealth and power. The issues raised by this story are grave. It also conveys the humiliating absurdity of oppression and the horrors of inclement nature, in forms of excessive heat and drought. The enduring brilliance of the novel lies in its ability to capture the intricacies of human situations in a postcolonial African milieu. The gross dehumanization of the Kenyan proletariats is presented in a painful manner. This corroborates Wanjala's view that the contemporary Kenyan writer is concerned with "the feelings, the tensions and conflicts permeating society... with the feelings, hopes and aspirations, and frustrations, the individual in a society that has so many claimant voices" (Wanjala, 140).

The novel is indeed replete with rich interpretive possibilities. One common thematic thread runs through it - the utter sadness and monotony of life, which seems devoid of hope for a better future. It touches on man's inability to control his own destiny. We also note that the novel reveals Mwangi as both a regional writer and a universal one. As a regional writer, Mwangi portrays the Kenyan situation; his status as a universal writer is revealed in his extraordinary insight into human nature. Actually, Mwangi's *Striving for the Wind* shares "a clear progressive and internationally informed political orientation as well as a commitment to the literatures, languages and historical experience of East Africans" (Biersteker, 24).

In the novel, Baba Pesa (literally "father of money"), a cruel and violent figure, sets the hazardous

conditions in motion and puts the less privileged members of the community into shame. His hatred for Baru (Father of Dirt) is so great that he does not want to see him around; his wealth has gone into his head: "I want him out of my view. I can't stand to see his hovels over my fence every time I look up from my veranda!" (34). Mwangi does not fail to dwell on the reason why men should be clamped into such a miry predicament. This is a basic question about the helplessness of man in a world where inequality, antagonism, hatred and suffering of varying degrees abound. The text has both a humanistic and materialistic message. It satirically denounces the entire society in all its flaws and foibles. Also, Mwangi exposes the diabolical sources of the wealth of some neo-colonialist capitalists using Baba Pesa who always strives to outstrip the other fellow as a case study. How did he come by his wealth?

> Baba Pesa had, naturally, benefited the most from the misfortunes of his nieghbours... he had also made money from smuggling Whiskey from Noafi stores to sell to the residents of the African locations where every sort of intoxicant were strictly prohibited (15).

With his sense of class, Baba Pesa looks on his neighbors with frank contempt, even though his wife treats them with courtesy and generous charity. Mama Pesa, with her feminine grace, her sense of class without the class consciousness of her arrogant husband, treats the neighbors with deference and civility because, in her mind, the poor people are just victims of a social determinism that is beyond their control. Mama Pesa's kindness to the goatherd (Mutiso) and the members of Baru's family bears testimony to her unique sense of generosity. The text thereby depicts a politico-economic system built through terror and victimization to generate fear, cynicism and doubt. This invariably creates confidence and bravery against horror among the

terrorized. The novelist seems to hint that insecurity and fright harden the recipients and alienate the perpetrators. On one of such occasions of his muscle flexing, Baba Pesa furiously orders Chief Kahiu to persuade Baru to sell his own meager land, the only source of his sustenance, to him: "Make him sell to me. It is criminal to have a good land in the hands of poor and incapable small men" (36). He even promises Baru a job if he could sell his land to him. The exploitation and dehumanization of Baru's family begin early and advance without appreciable pause and with accelerating speed; there is very little relief. Their lives signify a painful and engrossing spectacle.

However, the vices of the neocolonial bourgeoisie are not left unchallenged. Therefore, Juda, representing the masses, is antagonistic to his father's wickedness, and he organizes the oppressed to attempt a revolution. In the ideological clash between Baba Pesa and Baru, we see the clash between the rich and the poor in society. With this, Mwangi is able to explore the complex interactions, the interdependencies, the shifts and dislocations, and the endless conjoining and disjoining of multiple relationships. Once, Juda incites the peasants thus:

> Choose your elders from among yourselves, someone you can keep an eye on, people who are accountable to, not people whose only mission in life is to enrich themselves (53).

This is a form of social/domestic dissonance, a conflict between father and son. Esu / Ekwensu plays one of his 'creative' tricks on Juda and his father. This trickster figure (Esu) turns the relationship between father and son upside down. The skewed relationship between Juda and his father is also an artistic means for depicting corruption as a nurture-induced problem, rather than a hereditary or nature-induced trait.

Marxism and Psychoanalysis tend to see man as subject to irrational forces that thwart and stunt his life. To the Marxist, the forces belong to the economic and social world that has failed to develop in keeping with the possibilities furnished by scientific and technological advances (Osborn, 11- 61). To the Freudian, man's irrationality stems from the persistence of infantile modes of thought and feeling into adult life. The irrationality of the external social world touches off the inner irrationality of psychological life. With the characterization of Juda, therefore, Mwangi is quick to point out that neocolonial Africa tends to stunt the growth of the rational qualities of life. Therefore Juda, the agent of hope and change in the novel, is portrayed as a mentally derailed individual, a consequence of societal pressure and alienation of the upright people in society. Actually, recurring bouts of madness plague Juda's life. He is like the biblical Judas who betrays his boss. He only broods on strike and revolution, which are not actualized or concretized. He is always at the neck of his younger brother, Elijah, who is as brutal as his father. Juda and Elijah always engage in ideological conflicts; they are always antagonistic to the actions and ideas of each other. Juda, his pet dog (Confucius the Thinker) and his cohorts only 'walk in a circle.' This signifies directionlessness, confusion, inertia and retrogression. As a journalist, a filmmaker and empiricist, Mwangi strives to set aside moral presumption in the analysis of his society. However, this standpoint breaks through again and again. He speaks for the masses by hiding under the mask of Juda who insists that neocolonial Kenya is fraught with corruption and nepotism. Juda puts his father and, in fact, the bourgeois class on trial. He becomes the spokesman for the laborers and mobilizes them for a showdown with the capitalists.

Mwangi, in the novel, also critiques the system of education in most postcolonial nations. He is not totally against the existing educational system; however he is against its academic methodology and orientation, which have been designed along the Western tradition.

The problem of Juda concerning his university education is similar to that of Jean-Marie Medza in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*. To Juda, knowledge should be lived, not learnt by rote. This is also the opinion of Wanjala, who believes that African education should be Africanized (141). Mwangi, like Juda, his alter ego in the text, believes that the curriculum planners of African education should emphasize African languages, literatures, histories and cultures. While the father (Baba Pesa) believes that western education is desirable, the son (Juda), in his primitivistic temper, sees it as an aberration. Juda sees western education as a source of frustration, disillusionment, poverty and alienation. He believes that it does not help the individuals to fit into society; hence, this is another area of ideological dissonance between Juda and his father.

Mwangi's tabulation of the anomalies in the society is frightening. The contrast between the haves and the have-nots is sharply placed in focus. What generally first strikes us in the upper class of people, as expressed in this novel, is its predominantly materialistic sensibility. This is reflected in its excessive sensuousness, pleasure seeking, low level of education and wealth that is used to alienate and enslave the masses. Baba Pesa, the archetypal oppressor in the milieu, alters his ego and pride, openly displaying wealth by flinging money all over the place. The Manichean dichotomy of the classes in the society is also evident in Baba Pesa's speeches, which reveal a binary opposition between the 'slave' and the 'slave master,' the dominant and the dominated. We see the class-consciousness and arrogance of the capitalist class, symbolized by Baba Pesa, at its peak, in the following utterance of his: "there's only one estate in this district. Mine! The rest, including yours, are merely shambas. Don't you ever forget it" (17).

Therefore, Baba Pesa, a miser whose deity is money, strikes us as full of ego boosting. His acts are replete with emphasis on a status-relation between the speaker (the affluent) and the interlocutors (the poor

masses). He engages in incessant and hard-nosed violations of the rights of others. The characters in the lower class, the downtrodden, on the other hand, lack all life pleasures, impressionism and ornament. Their lives are full of the throes of hunger and misery; they occupy a harsh economic and social environment. The world of the novel suffers the pangs of Lilliputian growth, skill flight, crumbling infrastructures, perennial droughts, border conflicts, religious and sectarian clashes. The reader witnesses, in the novel, a bleak time of destitution and deprivation of the common man in neocolonial Kenya. Mwangi has used this text for 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.

The conditions of living in the referent world of the novel have an effect on the sharpness of Mwangi's satire on the irresponsible use of wealth and power. The woes raised by this story are grave; it also conveys the humiliating absurdity of oppression and the physical horrors of agonizing death, for instance, the horrendous death of Wangari, the daughter of Baru, as a result of painful birth pang. Ultimately, the oppressed (Baru's family and the dehumanized laborers) end up as a victim of an intractable historical mess. Thus, Mwangi is able to raise some vital questions on the helplessness and restlessness beseeching the Kenyan masses. The common man is made to apply physical force to achieve their goals; they engage in soul-destroying jobs, which are exhausting and degrading. Always, the reader comes across some women in faded cotton dresses with water gourds on their backs. Both the rich and the poor encounter dissonance arising from lack of requisite human communication. The class-conscious society also suffers from loss of communal empathy; there is disintegration because social harmony has vanished. This encourages lack of fellow feeling, injustice, dearth of fair play and partnership in joy.

The lives of most of the people in the text paint a

picture of abject poverty, which the common man faces in any neocolonial African society. The novelist also mounts a critical attack on the Mother Nature for being indifferent to the myriad of problems, which the exploited class see themselves in. In the composite picture of extermination, natural disaster, poverty, despair, dissonance and all-pervading aura of defeat, the reader is offered a picture of a decidedly neo-colonial African setting. This is a contradiction of the blissful social atmosphere of the African traditional society. Romanus Egudu comments on this:

> The peace and harmony resulting from the socialist nature of African traditional society has... been upset by colonialism which introduced into Africa 'a capitalist attitude' that makes one aspire to the possession of personal wealth for the purpose of dominating... his fellows (128).

Hence, the neo-colonial Africans who should be the 'Guardians' of the masses refuse to perform their legitimate task; instead they become tyrants, oppressors and dehumanizers. The oppressed are also dehumanized in terms of physical and psychological suppression. For instance, Elijah, the acknowledged foreman of his father (Baba Pesa) is described as "something of a tyrant" (10). Two antagonistic levels of social interaction can then be isolated in the society that is focused by Mwangi in the novel - viciousness of the neocolonial leaders (the tyrannical guardians) and unfathomable sorrow of their victims (the downtrodden).

The life of Wangari is full of exploitation from different perspectives. She experiences sexual harassment from Elijah, the chip off the old block of Baba Pesa. She also suffers 'sexploitation' in the hand of Baba Pesa himself. Mwangi uses the plight of Wangari to reveal the brazen sexual exploaitation of women in most African nations. She is used and discarded by Baba Pesa, while

his own daughter (Penina) is in a private high school in Nairobi where she is being prepared for a degree course in an American university. Although the pain of childbirth should be dulled by joyous expectations, this is not so for Wangari who eventually dies while giving birth.

The novel therefore dwells on the issue on the need for human sacrifice to promote societal growth. Mwangi's analysis of human relationships here is fascinating and merits careful explication. There is certainly a shift in the novelist's view of life: from a solid pessimism to an optimistic temper. For the final resurrection to take place, there must obviously be a death. This calls for human sacrifice, which is a necessary prelude to a new union, giving promise of a new life. We hasten to consider the final lines of the novel, which convey almost perfectly the vision of the novelist: "Have courage, she told her. *Mwathani ekaga wendo wake*. The good God does His will" (196). Mwangi, in his previous novels, is conceived as a pessimist. This may be because he is an implacable enemy of false, shallow optimism. However, in *Striving for the Wind*, Mwangi seems to have declared that although he is a tragic writer, he is a hopeful one. Thus, the novel is characterized by an ultimate tension between hope and despair. The end of the novel may appear almost avowedly ambiguous (Kurtz, 121; Johansson, 28), but it is invariably, beyond the suffering and squalor of the present, not merely a lost hope but a firm faith in the future.

The foregoing analysis of Mwangi's *Striving for the Wind* reveals that the novelist has an acute sense of social responsibility and makes a pungent exposition of the brutality of a menacing social order. He is able to take the wrappings off the neocolonial rulers in Kenya and lays bare their brutality and indifference to the plight of the suffering masses. The novel is colored with socio-historical realities, which are artistically reconstructed.

However, the enduring strength of Mwangi's discourse of the woes of existence in postcolonial African nations does not lie only on the thematic relevance of the

text. Rather what makes his art a unique expression of a common issue in African literature is the artistic bravura of the work, that is how he has made fresh a seemingly trite theme (Okonkwo, 58). Mwangi's fiction is socially committed and of a high aesthetic quality. This is an interrogation of the general belief that social commitment always brings about a decline in the quality of art. In formalist parlance, he has been able to defamiliarize supposed trite issues, and in psycho-analytic terms, he has succeeded in bringing his 'dream texts' to the embrace of the assumed readers, with the aid of his apt literary devices.

Mwangi, in the novel, piles up sign after sign and uses them carefully to show the worsening conditions of the peasants. The signs in the novel foreground a picture of exploitation where the dominant and the powerful oppress the downtrodden masses. Actually, signs are used as a mimesis of mental dissonance, characteristic of the lives of the neocolonial African masses. The signs also capture moments of aborted hopes and dashed aspirations in society where the optimism of the masses perishes before maturity, and growth is stunted. The indices of frustration and anguish are vividly evoked to present the hostility of Nature elements as they reveal the imminence of untimely death.

Specifically, the setting of the novel is used as a thematic vehicle - an index of death, destitution, decay, hollowness and brokenness. In the novel, Mwangi's use of symbols to depict the plight of the masses in the neo-colonial Kenyan milieu rises to a level redolent of allegory. The story is indeed replete with paralinguistic features that signify the dissonant relationship between the rich and the poor (Lutz, 110). The gestures made, the postures assumed and the movement of parts of the body either complement verbal expressions or pass a definite message to an individual or a group of individuals. Handshakes, a nod of the head, a wink of the eyes, kneeling, prostration, a whole lot of bodily expressions, the proximity between interlocutors, all depict the conflictual relationship

between the classes of people in the society. Baba Pesa's constant dissonant dealings with the peasants lend credence to the foregoing claim. His cars, houses, clothes and other properties tell us something about his status or lifestyle, his social world-view generally. Baba Pesa's behavior depicts him as a Nietzschean to whom the ordinary norms of human conduct do not apply. Driven by Mephistophelean ambition and Faustian lust for wealth, he creates his own norms, single-mindedly pursuing his individualistic course, regardless of the human destruction. He spreads around the shoddy acts of oppression and dehumanization he commits. He distances himself from the little fellowmen, and his acts sound pompous, condescending and incredibly proud.

Characters are also used symbolically in the novel. They serve as indices and thematic vehicles of the stories. The sociological approach in literary valuation suggests, among many others, that characters should be typical, that is, representing a class; for example the insensitive bourgeois class, the oppressed downtrodden masses and the agents of the state. The characters are inseparably linked with the spatio-temporal texture of the novels. It is in the characterization that the tone of Mwangi's novel is most manifest. The totalizing effects of a character cannot be satisfactorily arrived at without considering setting and language. This is in line with the popular structuralist submission that a character in a novel is the 'subject;' all other things are regarded as his/her acts and modifiers (Culler, 78). Gestures of the characters, their gazes, suspense, repetitions, cadences of voices and textual silences are marshaled to express the acute pangs of suffering and their disastrous effects on human souls. For instance, the characters in the text signify the multitudes of problems facing the peasants in neo-colonial African societies. This brings to mind Udenta Udenta's claim that "the nature of reality in a novel, to a great extent, is determined by the nature of the characters"(69).

Mwangi's fiction, with its realistic undertone, does not omit certain painful aspects of life. Slums, the horrible side of war, tragic racial problems, injustice, dirt, vermin, diseases, injuries, mental dissonance, perversion and violently controversial political problems find expression in his novels, as does Darwin's idea of survival of the fittest. The vivid portrayals of the milieu's marginal spaces, as well as their inhabitants, reflect the postcolonial Kenyan realities. For example, the city is used as a crucial locus of the socio-political tensions. The use of the cinematic technique has been found to be a recurring style in postcolonial writings. Agho comments on this: "post-contemporary novelists, often called surfictionists, now employ cinematic techniques as a consistent style in their writings" (Agho 1993, 178). The novel under analysis is resplendent with vivid narration. The novelist's dexterous use of dialogue is compellingly brilliant. His ears pick up and record the mannerisms of the characters. Consequently, the impression is of an intense and disciplined objectivity. The prowess of Mwangi is revealed in his profound vivid descriptions of occasions with each detail recorded, in order to communicate an important subject – the pain of existence. He portrays the fauna and flora of his environment, its birds, its animals, its weather and rivers in the novel. He can then be labeled a "neo-romantic" writer.

Mwangi has been able to laugh his nation out of folly and misdirection through the use of satirical techniques – humor, irony, pathetic realism, sarcasm, and parody. The hall-mark of the novel lies in its most touching pathos and its most delicate humor. Thus, Mwangi satirizes both the Western religions and the African traditional religion in this novel. The Police Force, with its corrupt practices, is also satirized in the novel. For instance, Ndege, one of the raving village lunatics, mocks the 'Ocs' of police thus:

> Go get him! Ordered the Ocs
> 'Who me?' asked Ndege

Yes, you!
Why me
You know where he is! (153-154).

Any discussion of the mood and tone of the novel must be closely related to the flatness of the characters. Since the characters live in a hostile environment, a gloomy setting, they are doomed from the outset. They are complete from the beginning since the plot in which they are found no longer show their development. Rather, they show, in a series of episodes, the different forms of their suffering from which something like a full picture of their society evolves. To depict the plights of the peasants and even the oppressors in the society, Mwangi employs the use of the stream of consciousness technique and reminiscences. This encourages the development of new methods of fictional expression. For example, in the prose text, the tears of the oppressed in the society and the pains of the afflicted, the victimized and the suffering people, do not allow Baba Pesa to rest. He does not enjoy his ill-gotten wealth in peace, and suffers intense mental dissonance. The psychological torture of Baba Pesa is revealed through the use of the stream of consciousness technique; for instance, he always meditates, painfully, on the carefree attitude of his son, Juda. Although, he is rich, he also partakes of the painful and dissonant realities of the neo-colonial society. The main ingredients in the novel relate to the African neocolony that is scarred by poverty, corruption and other familiar forms of underdevelopment (Joseph, 1; Zeleza, 23). This lack of social glue has led to the emergence of a 'social underclass' totally excluded from national society and economy. Commenting on this issue, Oanda Ogachi maintains:

> The degree of social exclusion and marginalisation among the population had widened. Among the urban poor and in the rural areas, the level of discontent with the the government was increasing because of failed economic programmes (Ogachi, 98).

Therefore, the concern of many post-independence Kenyan writers, Mwangi inclusive, is to expose the conflicts and pains engendered by the colonialists who took the land of the Kenyans and the neo-colonialists who have refused to redistribute the land properly (Tirop, 67; Zeleza, 122).

Is it an accident of literary history that Mwangi, who from the outset of his literary career has maintained a powerful grip on our experience of imaginative literature, has single-mindedly applied himself to the (re)presentation of a world wracked by stress, absurdity, violence, dissonance and pain, a world in the throes of a seemingly terminal affliction, a world where the ambition of the neo-colonial bourgeoisie to dominate the masses perpetually is suggestive of the wildness of their ego? The lasting quality, depth and consistency of response Mwangi has always elicited from his readers and critics would seem to rule this out, even when the controversy he has always generated is taken into consideration. The evidence might suggest that in Mwangi, this age, this period, the (neo)colonial African society has found the means of expressing some of its fundamental truths.

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