

## Appreciating Meja Mwangi's Going Down River Road via a Post-Modernist Lens

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### Abstract

Due to the so-called 'radical' approach taken by writers of popular fiction, coupled with their subjects of interrogation, a debate over quality and relevance has raged on with scholars criticizing popular literature for being aesthetically wanting and incapable of commitment requisite of literature. Such works have been referred to as "...a trashy and scabrous imitation of brothel and [low-life] especially yearned for the [low-brow] reader in this country". In this regard, the concept of 'popular' becomes ambiguous as it comes to the reader inscribed with the history of political and cultural struggles. It is not only a site of contested evaluation but the term 'popular' has also been used pejoratively. 'Popular' has been used as synonymous with low-class; and low-class with irrelevant. Literature forms a major avenue upon which knowledge can be passed. In Kenya, in particular, Literature is part and parcel of English; a compulsory subject. There is, however, a tendency to disregard popular literature in favour of canonical literature. The most obvious justification for this has been that canonical literature has more 'serious' knowledge to offer as compared to popular fiction/literature. Due to this relegation of popular fiction to the peripheries, very little attention has been accorded to its role in social commentary. This association of popular fiction with the "low-class" members of the society has led to the misconception that popular fiction has nothing "serious" to offer to the "elite readership". To debunk this notion, this paper undertakes a holistic analysis of Meja Mwangi's "Going Down River Road" and in so doing, argues for the fact that, from a post-modernistic viewpoint, this text provides verisimilitude to its fullest meaning. With use of adequate illustrations, the paper makes reference to the various tenets of post-modernism and: establishes the thematic concerns dealt with by Meja Mwangi; identifies and discusses the interplay between politics and literature as espoused in this text; and discusses the use of stylistics to capture the reality as lived by the characters in the text, and by extension, the author.

**Keywords:** Literature, Post-modernism, *Going Down River Road*, Popular Fiction.

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### INTRODUCTION

Literature represents a language or a people's culture: culture and tradition. However, literature is more important than just a historical or cultural artefact. Literature introduces us to new worlds of experience [1]. Ultimately, we may discover meaning in literature by looking at what the author says and how he/she says it. We may interpret the author's message [2, 3].

In academic circles, the decoding of the text is often carried out through the use of a literary theory, using a mythological, sociological, psychological, historical, or any other approach. Borrowing from Horace's literary tradition on poetry, followers of Horace's school of thought emphasize "to instruct" or "to delight", or both, as the major functions of literature [4]. However, diverging scholarly opinion indicates that literature is charged with the task of actively shaping culture. For instance, it is arguable that human beings

may learn how to cultivate a romantic idea of love (only) after reading works of literature that portray love in this light rather than as a social or sexual arrangement between a man and a woman [5]. It is worth noting that regardless of the differences, both ancient and modern approaches to literature emphasize on two major functions: to construct and articulate socio-cultural realities and to involve the reader in an invigorating interaction with these realities [6].

Literature, therefore, has an element of cultural enrichment. Literature leads to a better and deeper understanding and appreciation of one's society and the values by which that society stands. Through the study of and interaction with literature, one becomes informed about the institutions, attitudes and philosophies of various societies. By reading widely, one gains knowledge and insights about how other people live in the world. This not only leads to the development of sympathetic tolerance of other people's

cultures but also precludes the understanding that human experience is universal despite environmental and geographical differences.

Genre fiction, also known as popular fiction, is a term for fictional works (novels, short stories) written with the intent of fitting into a specific literary genre in order to appeal to readers and fans already familiar with that genre [7]. Popular fiction is an elastic term used to group works sharing similarities of character, theme, and setting - such as mystery, romance, or horror. While many critics still denigrate works of this type as simple entertainment, "escapist" fiction, marred by formulaic narratives, superficiality, and sensationalism, some adherents of modern literary theory have challenged the accepted notions of what constitutes serious literature. In addition, there are scholars who have opted to dismantle the barriers between elite and popular culture in order to understand both more fully [8, 9].

Genre fiction is often used interchangeably with the term popular fiction, and generally distinguished from literary fiction [10]. According to Asong [11], most fiction writing, especially of novel length, does not conform so tightly to the conventions of a genre. Indeed, there is no consensus as to exactly what the conventions of any genre are, or even what the genres themselves are. Writers, publishers, marketers, booksellers, libraries, academics, critics, and even readers all may have different ways of classifying fiction, and any of these classifications might be termed a genre. For example, one arguable genre of genre fiction - the airport novel - takes its name not from the subjects of its stories, but from the market where it is sold [12, 13]. It is beyond doubt that readers have preferences for certain types of stories, and that there are writers and publishers who try to cater to those preferences, but the term genre remains amorphous, and the assigning of works to genres is to some extent arbitrary and subjective.

### Defining Postmodernism

No one captures the problematic nature of defining postmodernism than Nichols [14] when he observes that "there are many books and articles which begin with or include a series of definitions and a study of the term(s) [postmodernism]....You will not find total agreement...". Despite the many attempts by scholars to define postmodernism, there are still lots of ambiguity and 'chaos' in defining the term. As all literary movements and modes of presentation, postmodernism is a reaction to the tenets of modernism. Consequently, the ever-elusive nature of capturing post-modernism in a single definition becomes postmodernist in itself [15].

It is my opinion that the mere attempt of defining what postmodernism is suggests an attempt to not only control but introduce a sense of totality, which by its very nature is anti-postmodernism. According to

Afolayan [16], the term postmodern literature is used to describe certain characteristics of post-World War II literature (relying heavily, for example, on fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, etc.) and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in Modernist literature. Postmodern literature, like postmodernism as a whole, is hard to define and there is little agreement on the exact characteristics, scope, and importance of postmodern literature. However, unifying features often coincide with Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the "metanarrative" and "little narrative", Jacques Derrida's concept of "play", and Jean Baudrillard's "simulacra." For example, instead of the modernist quest for meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodern author eschews, often playfully, the possibility of meaning, and the postmodern novel is often a parody of this quest (ibid.).

Postmodernism therefore earns its lack of definition from various factors, one of them being the evidently difficult, if not unsuccessful, inability of scholars to put a time frame within which it came into being. Another factor is the so-called 'chaos' and web of meaning that characterises postmodernism. In an attempt to define post modernism, Marshall [17] observes that:

*They shuffle uncomfortably in a shared space, rub shoulders angrily, eye each other suspiciously, laugh, and look for the door. There is none. They are neither outside nor inside. Sometimes, they clasp hands in recognition, and then begin to dispute. Each has a definition, each defines the other....No coherent picture emerges because there is no one who is not part of the network....This is not chaos, this is not anarchy, this is not entropy, although it may be chaotic, anarchic, entropic....That is the postmodern.*

Postmodernism is a movement away from the viewpoint of modernism. More specifically, it is a tendency in contemporary culture characterized by the problem of objective truth and inherent suspicion towards global cultural narrative or meta-narrative. It involves the belief that many, if not all, apparent realities are only social constructs, as they are subject to change inherent to time and place. It emphasizes the role of language, power relations, and motivations; in particular it attacks the use of sharp classifications such as male versus female, straight versus gay, white versus black, and imperial versus colonial. Rather, it holds realities to be plural and relative, and dependent on who the interested parties are and what their interests consist in. It attempts to problematise modernist overconfidence, by drawing into sharp contrast the difference between how confident speakers are of their positions versus how confident they need to be to serve their supposed purposes. Postmodernism has influenced many cultural fields, including literary criticism, sociology, linguistics, architecture, visual arts, and music [14, 10, 13].

### **Going Down River Road: An Open Literary Bar**

Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* was first published in 1976 and is, arguably, so much about the traps and travails of utter poverty. It tells the story of Ben, who works at a construction job and spends most of the little bit of money he makes on alcohol and prostitutes, until one day his (ex-prostitute) girlfriend leaves him with her young son (known only as Baby) and never returns. Ben is often miserable, and just as often he is an observer of worse misery than his own. Becoming the caretaker for Baby does not turn him into some sort of saint - he only barely takes care of the boy, though eventually he does pay his school fees and makes sure he goes to school.

Ben is vehemently misogynistic, and after Wini abandons him, his misogyny becomes worse than it ever has been. He is not an appealing character, and yet Mwangi writes about him in such a way that we can feel some sympathy, and so we care about his fate. As a reader, one tends to become frustrated with him (Ben) in the way one would become frustrated with a friend whose opinions seem ridiculous and whose actions even more so, but who nonetheless possesses enough elements of goodness to make one want to remain in his company for at least a short time. Mwangi avoids both cliché and sentimentality by making Ben such a difficult character to like, and yet there is enough to like - an intelligence that gets fiercely beaten down but won't disappear completely - that the book doesn't slide into frigid cynicism. Though the narrative verges on 'fetishizing' the squalor and revelling in the misery, it never quite descends to that (in my eyes, at least) because Ben's intelligence does occasionally prevail, and he recognizes not just the pain he feels himself, but the pain of other people - including pain he causes. He is incapable of escaping this world for himself, but he holds out hope that Baby might, and he tries as best he can to maintain the friendship most important to him so that he doesn't sink into a bleaker world of his own making, a world of only himself.

*Going Down River Road* is, indeed, a good example of a novel that is as much about its setting as its characters, because the characters are so inextricable from the setting, so entwined with it. The book grows repetitive at times, perhaps to indicate the borders of the life Ben has made for himself. The writing varies in quality from sometimes breezy and a bit thin to evocative in its descriptions of physical sensations and at its best, this is a novel that assaults all the senses.

There is a political element to the book, too, as Ben watches people try to solve problems around him and address the political situation of Kenya. The book does not offer much hope here, as captured in the following passage:

*There are many things Ben knows that Bhai will never understand. Machore can never raise the necessary*

*deposit to register as a candidate. And even if he could raise the money he would then have to find a constituency to contest and convince the constituents to vote for him. And who would listen to him? Only the labourers, and only at lunch time when there is nothing else to do. And he would still have a certain amount of trouble. The labourers are a tired hungry people. They don't believe in anybody or anything anymore. They do not even believe in the building anymore. Now they know. Just as a man will turn his back to you, a building gets completed and leaves you unoccupied. The hands just do not believe. If he bought them beer, Machore might convince the hands to listen to his promises. But they would still not vote if they got up with a terrible hangover or the weather became lousy on polling day or the queue got too long or something. To the hands it makes little difference: just another name in the newspapers, another face in the headlines, a voice on the radio, more promises... [18].*

We are left to decide for ourselves what such feelings amount to. Ben, clearly, has not been helped by politicians, and his growth, such as it is, is from leave-me-alone individualism to a recognition of his need for something other than himself, even if everything else - the government, Baby, his friends, his employers - seems to be an impediment or a threat. The novel ends with a small moment of connection, a moment that shatters the profound and futile loneliness the city instils. The ambiguity of this moment, its inability to be summed up as a simple moral and its many implications within the context of the story, makes *Going Down River Road* so much more than a simple portrait of a particular time or group of people - it is a scream against the waste that life allows.

In *Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel*, Kurtz [25] observes that Mwangi's "urban novels remain the paradigmatic and in many ways most interesting examples of the urban genre from Kenya," and he calls *Going Down River Road* "the Nairobi novel *par excellence*".

In Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road*, the author, albeit focusing more on Ben as a character, does not make Ben's story to be a master narrative. In fact, the entire text is an amalgamation of stories that follow the various characters in their attempts to channel the course of their lives towards a brighter future. The plot thus oscillates between convoluted and complex plots. The author shifts his focus, and that of the reader, from Ben to Wini, Baby, Ocholla, Max, Onesmus through Mr. Caldwell. It is thus arguable that Mwangi subscribes to post-modernism more so in his reluctance to plant a master narrative in his text. As a reader, one can simultaneously follow the life of say Baby or Yusufu without necessarily having the shadow of Ben lurking behind. As separate entities, the so-called 'minor' characters have a pivotal and significant

role in the overall development of both the story and the plot.

In post-modernism, the distrust of totalizing mechanisms extends even to the author and his own self-awareness; thus postmodern writers often celebrate chance over craft and employ metafiction to undermine the author's "univocation" (the existence of narrative primacy within a text, the presence of a single all-powerful storytelling authority). The distinction between high and low culture is also attacked through the employment of pastiche, the combination of multiple cultural elements including subjects and genres not previously deemed fit for literature. Arguably, this is where critics of popular fiction have found their material for accusing this genre of using string/vulgar language, promoting/advocating for crime, prostitution and corruption and generally perpetuating immorality for commercial purposes. However, it is my postulation that literature and society complement each other. There is a very thin line between who gives life to the other. Questions such as "does literature shape the society or does the society shape literature" are not only windy and long but are also bound to lead us (successfully) into an abyss of unproductive confusion. Literature, in general, espouses life. Although unable to capture all elements of life, it represents fragments of life which the author organises into an orderly representation. In this regard, literature has a mandate to reflect the goings-on in a given society and a particular time and space (setting). It is thus my contention that Meja Mwangi's representation of the vagaries of capitalism, individualism and the resultant consequences of urban development and spaces is not an attempt to glorify moral, economic or even political immoralities but is simply an attempt at shocking the reader into reality. In my view, Ben represents a large cadre of young (un)underemployed educated youths who are not only disillusioned with the capitalistic nature of Kenya's leadership but would also do anything to climb out of the bottomless pit of poverty and squalor.

According to Watt [19], the novel is a creature of time and place. As such, more than other, what the novel raises more sharply is the "problem of the nature of correspondence between words and reality" (p. 12) and by extension, the "problem of the correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates" (p. 11). In this regard, it is my opinion that the popular novel creates a niche for itself by the amount of attention it accords both to the individualisation of its characters and the detailed presentation of their environment. None offers this genre a great opportunity to capture all these than language. Writers of popular fiction experiment, manipulate and explore language to help them achieve a sense of verisimilitude in their works.

In *Going Down River Road*, the author goes full throttle and spares no effort in presenting to the reader the detailed details of not only particular individuals but also their immediate environments. For instance, right from the start of the text, the reader is made to 'suffocate' from the stench emanating from Baby's urine-sodden bed. The description of Max's loud noise-making jukebox, Wini's naked body and the entire poverty that defines Ben's immediate environment constitutes what Wanjala [20] would define as a "dirty book" not worth any "serious" reader's time and effort. This paper differs with Wanjala (ibid.) on the premise that a functional text is one that, to some extent, is an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals [19]. By presenting to us images that communicate to all our senses, Mwangi does not in any way violate social codes and norms that stipulate we coat words and experiences with 'appropriate' terms. He captures for us the real situation of how individuals struggle with the vagaries of urbanisation. For Ben to satisfy his canal desires, the stench from Baby's bed and the noise from Max's music rank as collateral damage.

Apart from revisiting the concept of sex as a basic, raw and primitive act of man which should be embraced in its totality, the author uses descriptive images to enable the reader understand the circumstances which force the characters to be who they are. Commenting on the position of language in postmodernism, Marshall [17] posits that:

*Postmodernism is about language. About how it controls, how it determines meaning, and how we try to exert control through language....It's about power and powerlessness, about empowerment, and about all the stages in between and beyond and unthought of....*

Many critics of popular fiction find fault with the explicit language employed by authors. What they fail to notice is that by being a product of time and space, the novel relishes in its embellished ornaments. The authors resort to language because language has the ability to capture the very nature of novel and its individualization of characters. Mwangi does this by setting characters against a background of particularized time and space [19]. For the reader to fully identify with the goings-on in the text, effort is made to ensure that since the reader may have to rely on his/her collective memory, time becomes the shaping force. The characters in *Going Down River Road* thus are absolved of their present actions when the author combines a convoluted and complex plot. This way, the overall plot of the novel utilizes the so-called explicit language and is distinguished by the fact that it uses "past experiences as the cause of present action: a casual connection operating through time" (ibid.). In this regard, it is arguable that albeit unsuccessful, Onesmus' attempts on Ben's life are not the author's attempt to glorify murder but is a deliberate way of

addressing the effects of bottled rage and vengeance. Throughout the text, the dialogue between Ben and Onesmus is characterized by hate, feelings of betrayal and desire for revenge on the part of Onesmus and feigned courage from Ben. It takes Ocholla's intervention (a non-verbal one, in this case) to bring an 'end' to the hostility between these two characters. In regard to the use of language, therefore, it is noteworthy to capture the words of Watt [19] who posits that through the use of language, the novel's "solidity of setting" (p. 26) and vividness of detail function to put "man wholly into his physical setting" (p. 27). It would be imperious of me if I were not to quote the words of Foster [21], as quoted in Marshall (ibid.), who says that the postmodernist "seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations".

Post-modern literature represents a break from 19<sup>th</sup> century realism. In character development, it explore subjectivism, turning from external reality to examine inner states of consciousness, in many cases drawing on modernist examples in the "stream of consciousness" styles of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. In addition, postmodern literature explores fragmentariness in narrative and character construction. This becomes apparent in Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* when the author gives the reader snippets of the characters' thoughts and life experiences. The author achieves this by use of different tenses for the different time frames. For instance, when narrating about Ben's experiences at the construction site or at Karara Centre, the author relies heavily on the use of the present continuous tense. Apart from giving the narrative an 'it's-happening-now' feel, the use of this tense can arguably be the author's attempt at showing that Ben's struggle for a better tomorrow are bound to fail. In fact, this is what happens by the end of the text more so when Ocholla's extensive family comes calling in the city coupled with the unwelcome visit by the council askaris. In contrast, Ben's earlier life in the military or his first meet with Wini is given in past tense indicating a sense of finality and lost opportunities.

As earlier mentioned, *Going Down River Road* is a text that deals with the day-to-day experiences of urban life. It vividly portrays both the physical and psychological anguishes that the characters undergo in their quest for survival. As such, the author employs black humour (a distinct feature of post-modernism) and thus treats 'serious' subjects in a trivial and humorous manner. For instance, after a night at Ben's place, Wini's preparations for departure are hampered by a seemingly trivial and mundane event – the absence of a mirror:

*'I cannot find the mirror,' she reported.  
'I just saw it there.'  
'Where?'*

*He rose on one arm to look. 'That red tablet under your fingers is the mirror, face down. The whole looking*

*glass I have.' She picked it up, screwed her face in amazement. She tried to look into it and gave up. No visitor had managed the manoeuvre yet. Ben himself had barely learned the trick.*

*'It is big enough,' he directed. 'You rotate the glass by sixty degrees and screw your face to one-twenty degrees. You will certainly see your face, if you do not break your neck first.'* (*Going Down River Road*, p. 26).

More often than not, the mirror does not feature in the list of priorities for many people. In this text, however, the author captures the level of poverty and financial despondency Ben has sunk in. It is arguable that Ben's use of humour is just but an attempt to mask the attack on his masculine pride when it becomes apparent that he can't afford a decent mirror. This also puts into focus the position of sex in this society. It is my contention that the author is putting it across that sex should no longer be a thing to be suppressed under societal norms and customs but should be accorded its role as a base human need. This is more so when it becomes apparent that Ben would rather pay for the sexual favours he gets from Wini rather than spend (less) on a mirror.

In post-modernist literature, in most cases, there exists a relationship between one text (a novel for example) and another or one text within the interwoven fabric of literary history. However, critics have pointed to this as an indication of postmodernism's lack of originality and reliance on clichés. Intertextuality in *Going Down River Road* becomes clearer when we put into cognisance the fact that this text is a product of time and space. Written in the early 1970s, the text parallels the capital city's state of development at social, economic and political levels:

*It was hell of a lousy day. Just the kind of day to take a bus to town...bus rides cost money, and money was scarce....Ben took a short cut...scattered with human excrement....The whole field was swarming with pathfinders walking to their work stations....The cheap roadside tea kiosks were all open (5 – 6).*

The above quote vividly captures the desolate living conditions of the underemployed in post-independent Africa. Ben cannot even afford bus fare and has to join the long throng of workers who have to walk to and from work because the money they receive as salary is not enough to cater for their expenses in this capitalistic environment. I make reference to capitalism because in a society where one's survival depends on the possible demise of another, the enterprising had to come up with kiosks to serve the working poor. This is a merge of artistic creativity and historical facts as documented in Kenya's history.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that *Going Down River Road* is a (social) situation that deals with a

“present” public. The language, themes and other attributes of the text are products of the society at a particular time in society. It is evident that in *Going Down River Road*, the novelistic world registers with extreme subtlety the tinniest shifts and oscillation of the social atmosphere by registering it as a whole in all its aspects. Meja Mwangi has imbued creativity with historical facts to describe to the reader the minutest details to the extent that the reader is transported to a world of make-believe.

Through the characters in the novel, Meja Mwangi exposes the complex problems confronting the Kenyan state, the suffering of the populace in the midst of plenty and the inability of the state to cater for its citizens. The ordeals of the destitute citizenry in *Going Down River Road* are similar to those portrayed by Iyayi [22] in his *The Contract* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o [23] in *Devil on the Cross*. The text illustrates the post-colonial environment that defined most African states as characterized by continuing cant, corruption, degeneration and frustration [24].

From the cockroach-infested rooms on Grogan Road where Ben lives with his secretary-prostitute girlfriend Wini and her son Baby, to the ironically titled under-construction 'Development House' where Ben earns his living as a 'hand', and on to the lowlife-ridden Karara Centre on River Road which Ben and his friend Ocholla frequent in search of Karara and prostitutes, Mwangi maps the landscape of urban poverty in the third world. *Going Down River Road* delivers an experience that is as unforgettable as it is unrelenting.

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