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Development House as a Microcosm of Social (Im)mobility: A Reading of Meja Mwangi's Going Down River Road (1976)

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Abstract

Mwangi's urban oeuvre is rife with depictions of urban poverty in all its rawness. In *Going Down River Road,* he deconstructs the myth of national development in Kenya in the early decades of independence by exposing the extant inertia in the lived experiences of the urban underclasses. This paper discusses the depiction of Development House as a symbol of social (im)mobility in postcolonial urban Kenya. In our reading of the novel, we will draw from the Marxism literary theory to explore the impact of capitalist relations in postcolonial Kenya. The paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach that acknowledges a connection between mobility studies and literary analysis to portray how *Going Down River Road* narrates (im)mobility in the realistic descriptions the ugly and grotesque social economic realities of the slums and backstreets of Nairobi in order to inspire the search for practical ways to bring about socioeconomic emancipation for the urban poor.

Key Words: (Im)mobility, Reification, Underdogs, Postcolonial, Socio-economic, Degeneration.

1 Introduction

Going Down River Road[1] is the second publication in Mwangi's urban trilogy that captures the bane of rapid urbanization in post-independence Kenya. The novel won the second Jomo Kenyatta prize and has been hailed as "the Nairobi novel par excellence."[2] The story revolves around the lived experiences of a conglomeration of unskilled and semi-skilled labourers represented by the protagonist, Ben, who had been a first lieutenant but was driven by greed to collude with armed robbers and he consequently lost his job after a court martial. This tainted work history haunts him for the rest of his life as he is unable to land a white collar job. After eviction from an insurance

[1] Mwangi, M. (1976) *Going Down River Road*. Heinemann
[2] Kurtz, R. J.(1998) *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel.* Africa World Press.

position, he moves in with Wini, a "reformed" prostitute, secretary and single mother who later elopes with her white boss abandoning her son, Baby, with Ben. Ben and his best friend Ocholla are part of a labourer workforce under an Asian-owned construction company at a site named "Development House," where they are subjected to conditions of immense exploitation and oppression.

Our reading of *Going Down River Road* is anchored on Marxist literary theories; especially Georg Lucaks' theorization of reification that will enable us to engage in an assessment of Mwangi's fiction as one that: "amply demonstrates a touching compassion for the social underdog and a quietness of tone that emphasizes rather than obscures the serious problems being analyzed."[3] The paper also draws from mobility studies in an endeavour engage with the socio-economic struggles of the urban underclass in postcolonial Kenya. We adopt the term (im)mobility used by Sheller(2018b) in reference to interconnectedness of mobility and immobility. In her view the two are always "connected, relational and co-dependent."[4] She argues that "motion and motionlessness are not antonyms and we should always think of them, not as binary opposites but as dynamic constellations of multiple scales, simultaneous practices, and relational meanings" (p.92). Her view is of interest to this study as it offers salient insights into the novel's portrayal of multifarious (im)mobilities among the low working classes in Kenya of the 70s. We explore how *Going Down River Road* portrays both literal and symbolic motionlessness and interruption of movement as indicative of socio-economic stagnation in postcolonial Kenya.

2 Racial (Im)mobility

Part of the burden of this paper is to explore the socio-economic and political (im)mobility of Asian Africans in postcolonial Kenya as depicted in the novel. We deconstruct racial stereotypes about Asians that were prevalent in East Africa at the time of the novel's publishing; in a bid to unveil the diminishing place of the Asian Africans; and how it impacted the welfare of the African workers under them.

In *Going Down River Road*, Mwangi projects an image of Asian Africans as both victim and perpetrator of the socio-economic immobility that characterized the developing Kenyan nation in the 70s. Regardless of the economic dominance of the Asians in the text, there are ways in which the

[3] Palmer, E(1979). *The Growth of the African Novel*. Heinemann (105).

[4] Sheller, M. (2018b) "Theorizing Mobility Justice." *Tempo Social, revista de sociologia da* 30(2) 17–34.

text presents them as a marginalized category. One manifestation of the precarious position of the Asian African in postcolonial Kenya plays out in the comic mimicry of the Indian accent used by a menial labourer by his colleagues. Khanji Bhai's claim of professional competence is ridiculously described thus: "pourty years I vork like mason... whole East Aprica. Pirst-class mason, pirst-class carpenter" (Mwangi 1976, p. 34). The humour elicited by the caricatured imitation of the Asian accent serves as a critique of constructed racialised identities. Despite his vast experience, Khanji Bhai has earned neither the respect nor friendship of his colleagues, especially his handy man, the Hyena, as we would have expected since the two are described as more similar than different. "They are both about the same age, both lean and rugged in a permanent way and both as dusty as the cement mixer...they ought to be friends but will never be", as the Hyena perceives him as "a stupid little Indian" (Mwangi 1976, p.88, 123).

Khanji Bhai is representational of the mobility of low cadre of Indians to East Africa as indentured labourers who had been conscripted to construct the Kenya-Uganda railway. After the completion of the railway some these labourers remained and made a life for themselves in various regions of East Africa. The text underscores this regional mobility in the claims that he has worked in "Mombasa, Kampala, Kisumu, whole of East Aprica," thus a self-proclaimed first class menial labourer (p.34). These physical movements denote inertia in the socio-economic realities of Asian immigrants who had come to Africa as indentured labourers. In the words of Siundu(2005) [5], "the propensity towards ameliorating their economic lives sometimes makes Asians engage in cyclical migrations" (p.23). Their plight resuscitates debates of colonial exploitation embedded in the historical construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway. Gorman (2018)[6] perceives this railway a metaphor for colonial capitalist oppression. Ndaka (2024)[7] corroborates the view in his perception of "the railroad, as a metaphor of mobility and arrival" (p.91). Ndaka further argues that, "the

[5] Siundu, G. (2005): The Unhomeliness of Home: Asian Precense and Nation Formation in MG Vassanji's Works *Africa Insight: Giving Insight into Change in Africa*. 35(2)15-25.

[6] Gorman,D.M. (2018). Revising resistance: Historical violence in the globalised postcolonial imaginary (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin). University of Texas Digital Repository. https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/items/da0fb2cf-4b98-4673-a18e-5df9bdacac76 Gorman-

[7] Ndaka, M F.(2024) Colonial Infrastructure and its Post-Independence Afterlives in Peter Kimani's *Dance of the Jakaranda*., *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, 10(2) 90-107

railway/train is not only a harbinger of loss; it also enhances mobility to service and protect the empire (p.94).

Through Bhai, Mwangi dramatizes hierarchies of power within the hegemonic race. Irrespective of his racial affiliation, Bhai has lost status to the extent that "he only brings half a litre of milk with him for lunch... he probably has not tasted curry for a long time" (p. 46). Unlike the higher level Asian workers who are well paid, Mwangi situates him in the same category as the African labourers, as he too is affected by the inflation and he worries about meeting the basic need of food. Bhai laments that: "Roti up... chicken curry up, now de bloody milk up it go" (p.102). The narrator informs us that "increasing the price of milk will definitely starve him to death" (p. 102). Ironically however, he faces double alienation as he does not belong among the larger proletariat category. when Khanji Bhai tries to participate in the political discussions that the labourers engage in during lunch breaks, the African workers dismiss him as "a goddamn Indian"(p. 237). By depicting the Asian labourer as a pariah within his economic class, the text demonstrates the dispossession inherent in the racial categorizations prevalent in the Kenya of the time. These depictions underscore the social immobility of the low social category Asian Africans in postcolonial Kenya.

The alienation of Asian African menial labourer is further exemplified in the depiction of their being subjected to exploitation by fellow labourers of African descent. When Hyena borrows money from Khanji Bhai , he is unwilling to pay back as "the Hyena thinks Khanji Bhai should be Indian enough to forget such small sums" (p. 188). In one such incident the author humorously portrays cat and mouse games between the two on as Bhai stands guard at a latrine door to ensure Hyena does not evade settling his debt. However, the latter cunningly escapes through a false door at the back of the latrine to the chagrin of Bhai (p. 188, 193).The humour serves as a satire of the precarious socio-economic place of low social categories of Asian Africans in postcolonial Kenya.

The text further explores the plight of the disempowered class that he represents through a depiction of the psychological torture Bhai endures in the hands of the African colleagues who presume his racial identity to be synonymous with abundance. Mwangi uses the food metaphor to highlight the frustrations emanating from his double alienation as a poor labourer, and a racially profiled one. In one instance when Khanji Bhai opens up a serious discussion about his frustrations with the modalities of work, Ocholla diverts attention from the issue at hand to tease him for his culinary preferences. "How much curry you bring for lunch Bhai?... vot you say about the chicken curry, Bhai?' Ocholla asks. Bhai turns on him. 'Your madder curry', he swears at him" (p. 34). He is also caricatured as perpetually suffering from diarrhea, a possible mockery of his spicy Indian dishes,

and by extension, a mockery of his Asian culture (p. 224). The racial profiling cements the thesis of the diminishing social mobility of Asian depicted as subjects of ridicule in the host country.

The narration of diarrhea can also be read as an embodiment of the early colonial stereotype of the Asian as an "unhygienic and duplicitous character" (Ojwang, 2005, p. 5).[8]Mwangi's allusion to such pejorative stereotypes in the depiction of Khanji Bhai signifies stasis in notions of racialised perceptions in postcolonial Kenya. Such cultural bashing betrays a racial intolerance that underscores the strained social relations at the site as a reflection of the national and continental realities.

The socially alienating environment plays out yet again through a different group of Asian workers "the four Banianis sit together away from everyone else and play cards. They rarely mix with anybody else. They bring their own lunch; eat together, then play cards in Gujarati" (p.46). The use of vernacular among the Asians portrays the feelings of dispossession and alienation. The Banianis exhibit what Onsengo (2022)[9] describes as "the quest to maintain ...identity and the intention to cope with the challenges in the host community", which in his view is "an embodiment of diasporic challenges in postcolonial times" (p. 45). Such individuals, he argues, "are consumed by the nostalgic and sentimental feeling about home to which they have an emotional attachment and owe allegiance" (p. 49). Siundu[10] further corroborates this argument in his perception of the aspiration for a sense of unity as "necessary in re-creating their new nations and homes within East Africa" (P.21). Through the vivid descriptions of the Banianis' physical and linguistic differences the text deconstructs the anti-Asian racial stereotypes of their aloofness and arrogance. As Onsengo puts it: "vernacular language helps diasporic people to maintain the strong feeling and emotional bonding; and explore socio-cultural, historical and political concerns in the diaspora" (p. 53). We argue that this aloofness is significative of the anxiety of navigating an unwelcoming social environment.

Mwangi narrates the racial element in the wage/ labour binaries at development House as a strategy of the Asian Africans to consolidate dominance as a race. This aspiration is evident in the

[8] Ojwang, O. D. (2005) The Bad Baniani Sports Good Shoes: Asian Stereotypes and the Problem of Modernity in East Africa, *Africa Insight: Giving Insight into Change in Africa*. 35(2)4-14.

[9] Onsengo, M. D. (2022). Trans-border migration, racial identity and (dis)location in M.G. Vassanji's novels: The in-between world of Vikram Lall and The Gunny Sack (Master's thesis, Kaimosi Friends University).

[10] Unhomeliness, 21

novel in the way the hierarchies of power are structured at the construction site. "The highest placed were masons and carpenters, a mixture of Asians and a few Africans" (Mwangi, 1976,p. 13). Moreover, the Asian workers are earning "three or four times" what the Africans earn (p. 34). This racial bias can be read as an attempt to solidify their position as a race and to counter the alienation that characterized the urban space in the Kenya of the time.

In a dialogue between Ben and Ocholla the two conclude that "sometimes it doesn't pay to be black," even as they mockingly outline Yussuf's earnings as comprising: "house allowance, insurance, and inconvenience allowance for soiling his beautiful white skin" (p. 35). This last purported allowance is indicative of the uneasy racial relations within which the Africans lean on pejorative stereotypes of Asians as mean "money making robots and Africans as poor victims"[11]

Mwangi uses Ben and Yussuf as character foils to satirize the idea of privileging of labourers on racial basis. Despite his role as foreman, Yussuf is described as "drug –crazed" and incompetent. (p. 89). According to Ocholla, "what the Indian knows about building is not worth a shit," yet he is highly paid for "being an Indian like his uncles" (p. 34, 35). The novel describes his slowed mobility as a metaphor for his inefficiency as a foreman. He is said to rush off "in his now familiar rush that normally takes place only in his mind. After two fast steps he, reverts to the regular slouch-waddle that gets him to the scene of the emergency when it is already stale (p. 38). His manner of movement is significative of his inefficiency. Yussuf covers his inadequacies by giving Ben a theoretical promotion without the financial benefits that would be expected to accompany such a change in job description. "You are the assistant foreman, Ben… Long as you do not demand extra pay for it" (p. 169). Ben's purported upward mobility is a sham as it does not signify economic empowerment. This ridiculous and ironic offer highlights exploitation of the "other" as the inevitable outcome of racial work relations.

During the colonial era East Asian Africans occupied a middle status between native Africans and Europeans. With the advent of independence in the 60s and 70s their position became even more precarious than it was. In the words of Makokha (2011), [12] it was "a time of violent transition from a white dominated setter colony to a black-dominated African post colony" (p. 155). In *Going Down River Road*, the author portrays the Asian worker's diminishing social mobility.

[11] Odhiambo, D.11

[12] Makokha,J.K.S (2011) Imagined (Dis)locations: Poetics of Setting in the Early Fiction of M. G. Vassanji *East African Literature: Essays on Written and Oral Traditions*.155-176.

Makokha (2011), [13] explores a postcolonial condition he terms "an in-betweenness" as plaguing the postcolonial Asian Africans (p. 163). He perceives the Asian African characters in these works as having lost their sense of secure identity acquiring a new identity of in in-between (p.163). This paper considers the Asian entrepreneurs in *Going Down River Road* as an embodiment of this in-betweenness as they exemplify the dislocation that characterizes the constantly changing racialised environment of postcolonial Kenya.

At the construction site, Yusuf is instructed by his brothers, the bosses, to "go easy" on a worker who "comes to work drunk, and sleeps on the job," since this labourer's brother is "big in the ministry" and if they sack him there would be "no more government tenders and "maybe no more work permits"(p. 92-93). Their predicament underscores the anxieties that accompany the effective running of businesses by Asian Africans in postcolonial Kenya. Here the novel exemplifies Onsengo's argument that "Diaspora people are alien members of the host society and do not influence the government of the day. They are ... fragmented people whose sole role is loyalty to their safety and security (p.46)."[14] In this narration, Mwangi not only explores the corruption and nepotism that characterized the capitalist economy of the Kenya of the time, but he also engages with the precarious position of the Asian entrepreneurs within the context of the emerging neocolonial leaderships in the Kenyan nation.

Going Down River Road further problematizes the claims of racial superiority among Asian Africans in post-colonial Kenya; by portraying the new African leadership as introducing policies geared at gradually situating the native Africans in the economic narrative of the emerging nation. The novel fictionalizes the Africanization policy that was introduced in Kenya in the 70s. Within this context, The Asian employers embody a politically impotent immigrant community. Their marginalization plays out in the way their welfare is neglected in the government directive. "They had no choice... it is the government. They want to Africanize the building industry. So, they suggested we start promoting Africans" (Mwangi, 1976,p. 226). Yussuf confides that "they do not like it" as the compliance "will cost them so much, they will have to cut down on the number of hands" (p. 226). This quote not only highlights the political dilemma of the Asian community at the time, but it also hints at the unpopular strategies that they have had to adopt to counter their socio-economic and political vulnerabilities. In the words of Makokha "they have to "adopt and adapt to an

[13] Makokha, 163
[14] Onsengo, 46

atmosphere of an unknown, unfamiliar environment that is East Africa after independence" (p.165-166).

Going Down River Road depicts social immobility in the portrayal of the complexity involved in the attempts to perpetuate the racial categorizations that characterized the colonial period. In a subtle way the novel narrates the problematic of belonging for the Asian Africans whose lives are imbued with an anxiety to assert their position and silence the demons of dispossession. The friction inherent in these racial superiority battles is exemplified in the narration that the four Banianis who never attend the "workers' parliament" attend on the day Ben is promoted to foreman (p. 221). "They wanted to know why Ben had been promoted to foreman while there are more experienced workers around" (p. 221). Experience in this case can be read as code for the racial superiority, and the claim to this superiority as a feeble attempt to resist the emerging changes. Yussuf further laments to Ben that he would have to adopt a hated habit of wearing a turban; "so there would be no mistaking who is the chief-headman" (p. 226). We argue that this obsession to maintain racial boundaries and the hostility towards the possibility of answering to an African is a metaphoric unfolding of the anxiety that characterizes the institutionalization of racism in independent Kenya. As Onsengo (2022) aptly observes the policy to Africanize jobs in public service was an aspect of "marginalizing other races" (p. 62). In his view "members of the Asian community are the targets of nationalization policies on racial grounds geared to subdue them (p. 73). Such policies underscore the exclusion of the Asian Africans form the mainstream society.

Mwangi acknowledges the leading economic role played by Asian Africans in post-colonial Kenya in the narration of their contribution to the challenge of rapid urbanization as Africans have flooded the city of Nairobi in search of upward mobility. The novel indicates that there are "at least three million manual labourers in the city!"(Mwangi, 1976, p. 35). This bloated labour force sets pace for the prevalence of exploitative labour relations as those who manage to get the lowly jobs are anxious to maintain them lest they join the jobless multitudes.

The Asian bourgeois are in a position to open up employment opportunities for the Africans since as Siundu (2005) notes, "local Asian bourgeoisie had amassed their wealth and power within the very colonial structures that gave them leeway to engage in business something that most Africans were not given" (p. 21). This, he observes, enabled the Asians to have "some power over Africans who were largely impoverished giving the former an erroneous sense of superiority over the latter" (p. 21). The next section of the paper discusses how the experiences of the African labourers at Development House act as a commentary on the socio-economic degeneration of the poor working

classes in postcolonial urban Kenya; as notions of racial superiority and the prevalent state of joblessness in postcolonial Kenya render them vulnerable to exploitation.

3 Reification and Degeneration of the African Poor Working Classes

Going Down River Road dramatizes reification in the depiction of exploitation of the labourers and their subsequent socio-economic immobility. Lucaks (1972) defines reification as "a commodity-structure in which a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a phantom objectivity(p. 95)"[15] This concept explores how capitalism impedes normal human relations in the process of production with the humanity of the worker being overlooked by the bourgeoisie who are anxious to maximize profits.

In the novel, Mwangi uses metonymy to portray reified relations at Development House by The Asian bosses use the term "hands" to refer to the manual labourers : "Hands! That is what they are here. That is all they are good for. If the contractor could make hands, he would never need labourers. To Yusuf and his uncles, Ben and Ocholla and their lot are simply hands. Not workers, and never people" (Mwangi, 1976, p. 33). The protagonist's disenchantment with the labour relations of exploitation narrated here underscores the dehumanizing environment within which the lowest rung of the poor working classes operate.

This reference to "hands" is similar to the usage of the term by Dickens (1854)[16] as a satire of the dehumanizing effects of industrialization on workers and communities in mid-19th century England. One of Dickens' protagonists is Stephen Blackpool one of the workers at the mill simply referred to as "the Hands." Though an honest and hardworking labourer,he is framed by Tom, a representation of the rising middle classes, and he is wrongly accused of robbing a bank. Unfortunately, Blackpool eventually dies while attempting to vindicate himself. His plight resonates with the realities of the poor working classes in Kenya who become pawns in the bourgeois game of amassing wealth.

In *Going Down River Road*, Mwangi uses the term "hands" to castigate the capitalistic exploitative forces in Kenya which he presents as responsible for stripping the casual labourers of humanity to the extent that they are not viewed as fellow human beings but simply as hands. Their worth is pegged not on their individuality and humanity but on the labour they offer. The exploitative bourgeoisie are not interested in them as people but only associate with the workers in as far as the

[15] Lukács, G. (1972). History and class consciousness (R. Livingstone, Trans.). MIT Press.

[16] Dickens, C. (1854). *Hard Times*. Bradbury and Evans

labourers' hands can work and produce wealth for the rich. The labeling of the workers as "hands" justifies their exploitation since to the bosses, they are not really people hence no need to regard the labourers' views, needs or general wellbeing.

This study explores the depiction of a downward spiral in the lived experiences of these reified workers through a narration of their inability to access the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. For instance Ocholla reports to work in "trouser legs were so tattered that he should have cut them off at the knees, instead of rolling them up so that his thin legs standing in them looked like a couple of old parking meters" (p. 12). His dilapidated appearance is typical of the rest of the workers who are emaciated and raggedly dressed. The image of a parking meter connotes immobility as it is associated with vehicles that have ceased moving. Its usage aptly captures the inertia in the lives of this class of workers whose lives are "parked". Their upward immobility is suggestive of the socio-economic marginalization of the low-level working classes in postcolonial urban Kenya.

The text captures this inertia in a description of meaningless mobility: "Nobody seems aware of where they are going, where they are coming from, or whether they are doing anything at all" (p.104). Their lives are marked by continual stagnation as their labour benefits the rich. The building thus serves as a spatial metaphor representing the degenerating urban space that is rife with exploitation and inequality.

The economic exploitation of the worker within capitalism plays out in an intimate expression of disenchantment on a specific pay day: "There are times I wish they did not pay us in shillings … What currency do you fancy? Dollars? ...food and drink…and a place to lay one's arse" (p. 194). Ocholla's wistful thinking insinuates a longing for movement from the current capitalistic terms of economic engagement to the more accommodative socialist systems of barter trade within which the needs of all parties would be met. This seemingly retrogressive rationale emanates from the state of utter alienation and disenfranchisement the workers are subjected to. Despite their hard work they are unable to meet the most basic of human needs- food and shelter.

The African labourers' wages are satirically described as so meagre that it becomes impossible to come up with a practical budget (Mwangi,1976, p. 188). Here the text engages with the injustice in the Kenyan labour market characterized by a wage-labour binary that condemns the masses to perpetual socioeconomic stasis. As Ezeugo (2021) observes of Mwangi's fiction, "the poor cannot help but speak the language of poverty, joblessness, hunger and dejection," as they navigate

an "environment too hard and precarious for the poor masses" (p. 5)[17]. The novel exemplifies the words of Crocker(1972)[18] in the argument that: "for continued existence of capitalism, it is necessary that the value of the wage given to the worker be less than the value produced by the worker's labour" (p. 204). *Going Down River Road* highlights the withholding of the full value of the workers' wages as the most basic form of exploitation.

The novel further exploits the food metaphor to depict the degeneration of the labourers. During lunch breaks, they patronise dingy eateries where they are exposed to subhuman conditions that precipitate their downward spiral. The process of taking lunch is described in four phases all of which highlight the vulnerability of the workers. The first phase involves crossing the road safely evading the risk of hit and run accidents, the second phase entails the humiliating experience of asking for lunch on credit, while "phases three and four involve the actual eating and the inevitable diarrhea" (p. 41). Mwangi gives a detailed description of the inexistence of sanitation standards at these joints to portray the disregard for the health of the customers. The novel details gory descriptions of "green latrine flies swimming in the pot, shitting in the porridge and dying all over, even drowning in the tea" (p. 44). Other than the risk of food poisoning the customers are further exposed to fatal diseases such as cancer when they are served in containers such as paint tins (143). The procedure of cleaning these "utensils" foregrounds further the precariousness of the conditions that the labourers who frequent these joints are exposed to: "He clears the way for the woman to dip another dirty tin (this one labelled Robbialac paint) into a bucket of milky dirty water, slosh it around and refill it with porridge for another hungry customer" (p. 43). This disregard for sanitation accounts for the stomach upsets described as the fourth phase of the lunch process. It also to a great extent highlights the dehumanization of the poor who can only afford the meals offered at such dingy places.

Mwangi introduces an even lower social class through the food metaphor. "Hungry street urchins hang around and collect the plates so that they may take care of the leftovers before cleaning" (p. 44). The movement of these homeless children to the eateries highlights the plight of the urban "castaways."[19]The text revisits the plight of children of the urban poor in a description of running

[17]Ezeugo, A. (2021). Point-of-View In Meja Mwangi's Novels Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3809253 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3809253

[18] Crocker, L. (1972) Marx's Concept of Exploitation *Social Theory and Practice* 2(2)201-15.

[19] Yenjela, W. (2023). "The Nairobi Castaways: Novelistic Representations of Slum Dwellers", Les Cahiers d'Afrique de l'Est / *The East African Review* [Online], 58 |2023 URL

battles between the police and street children. While walking home the protagonist witnesses an encounter of police brutality meted on a gang of street urchins aged between four and eight. The text records that "the brutish horses rear and neigh in confusion then as one they charge after the youths" (p. 229). Baby, who is among these children, has degenerated from being a prostitute's child to an abandoned child under the mercies of the protagonist and is on his way to becoming a street urchin. His exposure to the vagaries of modern city life renders him vulnerable to the allure of gang life. The novel describes the children as "the little park bwanas" in reference to their entrepreneurial strategies of idling around parking spaces in the towns to offer services as potters or to simply beg (p. 228). Through Baby the text explores the degeneration of urban youth within a disempowering urban economy, a motif that Ngugi wa Thiong'o explores in both *Matigari*[20] and *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*[21]. In *Going Down River Road* Mwangi portrays Kenyan urban childhoods as endangered by the indifferent capitalist structures. The text illuminates the plight of "the lonely orphaned child" whose truancy can be read as socially constructed. As he walks with the truant boy, Ben "looks away from the accusing eyes to the tall Hilton Hotel and farther to the rest of the busy, indifferent city"(Mwangi, 1976, p. 229). Despite Ben's struggle to provide his school fees, he is not able to avail mentorship and balanced parenting within the social environment in the town hence the boy becomes exposed to truancy. Here Baby represents the plight of children as the most vulnerable social category among the urban poor. In a bid to redeem Baby Ben takes him on an "empowerment walk" to The Africa Hotel, a recluse of tourists and wealthy Africans.

At the hotel the text brings out the contrast between the treatment of the rich and the poor in the description of the patrons of the hotel as "the real people, the gods of the tourist industry, and the bastards without whose presence one is made to believe he would starve and rot in hell (p. 231). By taking Baby to the prestigious joint, Ben engages in a symbolic act of repositioning him in the society as a human being of equal worth with the rest of humanity associated with finesse. He also takes this chance to be a parent to the boy, inspiring in him the need to continue schooling so as to evade a life of socio-economic struggle envisaged in manual labour such as shoe shines, car wash boys and labourers like himself (p. 234). Ben's timely intervention changes the trajectory of Baby's

[20] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1989). *Matigari.* Heinemann.

[21] Mugo, M. G., & Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1976). *The trials of Dedan Kimathi.* East African Educational Publishers.

life from taking a downward spiral offering the possibility of breaking the vicious cycle of alienation bequeathed on him by his unenviable background. This episode also captures the author's vision of hope for an impoverished youth in postcolonial Kenya.

4 Modes of Transport as metaphors of Exclusion

This section explores the argument of Ben Driss, H. (2021) that "(im)mobility undergirds discourses of power and control," to explore the depiction of variegated (im)mobilities in the novel as indicative of the socio-economic inequalities and injustices in postcolonial Kenya (p. 90). The novel portrays contrasting journeys for various categories of workers to explore the plight of the poor working classes. The workers in the low social categories have to walk from the slums to their workstations in the city since "bus rides cost money and money was always scarce" (p. 7). Other than the walking workers and the middle class who can afford bus rides, Mwangi introduces the upper classes who drive to work, and do not have to rise as early. "The drivers of fast cars were still in bed nestling between the sweaty thighs of their big women" (Mwangi ,1976, p. 8). The bigness here can be read as a metaphor for the excesses of the bourgeois class.

Once in the city the driving class arrogantly intimidates the pedestrians and violates their right to use the roads in safety. The narrator points out starvation and road accidents as, "the workers' number one public enemy" (p. 44). The labourers' journeys to and from the eateries are dramatized as indicative of their plight as an oppressed group since "drivers never give way. They fear losing forever their right of way" (p. 45). Moreover "they have the trump card in the survival game-the death machine in their hands" (p. 45). In this depiction Mwangi portrays roads within the cityscape as spaces of contestation in the display of power among social classes. He seems to satirize the display of power by the rich middle classes in their total disregard for the poor working classes who are relegated to the status of dispensable nuisances within the capitalist economy. In exploring the unequal power relations between the rich middle classes who own cars and the walking labourers, the novel condemns the glaring social disparities that entrench the oppression and exploitation of the low social categories in Kenya.

The text highlights the impact of such social relations through fictionalization of the fear and intimidation that the motorists instill in the pedestrians. "Ocholla does not utter a word until they get safely across and his respiration reverts to normal" (p. 45). Once safe, he defiantly kicks his shoes in the dust and swears to get his own car. However, Mwangi portrays the impotent protest of the disenfranchised pedestrians in the description that he "scoops tons of dust in the open-mouthed shoes" (p. 45). The poverty and disillusionment of the workers he represents is further foregrounded

in the statement that "what he needs real bad is a pair of shoes, not a car" (p. 45). The battered shoes thus serve as a double metaphor of impeded mobility both literally and figuratively. They are both a testament of his pecuniary incapacitation evident in the inability to afford basic life necessities as well as signification of slowed mobility. By contrasting his physical immobility and to the dangerous speed of those who possess cars, the text explores the incapacitation of the poor working classes who are impotent victims of hit and run accidents, making glaring the social inequalities inherent in postcolonial urban Kenya.

The motif of the vehicle transmuting from being a symbol of mobility to a purveyor of power and intimidation plays out even among the proletariat with the depiction of a lorry driver, Onesmus, using his position behind the wheel to not only scare but also murder those he deemed his enemies. Speaking of the character, Onesmus and his lorry, Nwulu, N. F., & Okere, M. (2021)[22] describe it as his "war – machine," and the two as, "the devil called Onesmus and his instrument of liquidation, the tipping truck" (p. 174). In reference to its motion, they argue that: "The roaring of the tipper is its epiphany; for when the tipper is in motion, it could be anything but a tipper - a liquidation machine, a maniac, a beast; so also is Onesmus when he is set on carrying out his devilish assignment. Man and machine cross-breed and merge into one: the thing is the character and vice versa" (p. 176). On several occasions he attempts to run the protagonist over to revenge Ben's role in his downward spiral from being an army sergeant to sharing the protagonist's current fate as a menial labourer (Mwangi, 1976, p. 37).

Onesmus happens to have been one of the officers in the "B Company Support Platoon" under Ben who he had enlisted in the botched up collusion with robbers that had ended with the sacking and tainting of the credibility of the entire platoon (p. 48). This flashback introduces the idea of the degenerating urban space at the time of the novel's publishing in the 70s. The protagonist describes the prevailing atmosphere in this manner: "nothing was impossible in those days...everybody was scrambling for big money and no one cared how you made it. You could have sold the whole goddamn country to eager buyers"(Mwangi, 1976, p. 61). As Olalekan (2019). [23] puts it: "the resources of the country were therefore being plundered; by the privileged ruling class and their cohorts" (p. 51-52).

[22]Nwulu, N. F., & Okere, M. (2021). Objects as character emblems in selected novels of Meja Mwangi. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*, 4(5), 162–181.

[23]Olalekan, O. O. (2019). Literature and leadership crises in Africa: Current realities and future prospects. *Journal of Issues in Language and Literary Studies*, 5(1), 42–57.

Onesmus' degeneration can be read in the context of the general moral decline of the society of the time. His disregard for the sanctity of human life is symptomatic of a social malady within capitalistic societies where individualism overrides concern for the rights of the rest of humanity. The novel narrates this degeneration in depicting killing as a service rendered to eliminate undesirables. In a flashback we are informed of how the rest of the labourers in a previous site had paid Onesmus to run over a hated foreman (p. 47). This depiction highlights a communal degeneration where murder becomes an easy option in the solving of conflicts. It is in the same vein that he ironically loses his life through an "accident" at the site when the hunter becomes the hunted (p. 169-171). Onesmus thus serves as a representation of the identities that rise out of the disenabling urban environment which is rife with moral depravity.

To engage with political satire the author interweaves scatology and immobility to tease out the extant manifestations of capitalist ideologies in 20th century Kenya, and their impact on the urban poor. The back alleys used by the urban poor are described as characterized by "air thick with the rotting smell from overflowing rubbish bins… heavy with the suffocating stink of burst sewers" (p. 67). In the mornings, to access their work stations in the city they engage in "walks of shame" on "paths crisscrossing the dewy grassland scattered with human excrement" (p. 23, 7). On a typical morning the protagonist is exposed to dried up and fresh excreta as captured in the descriptions such as: "one of these mounds of shit was still steaming in the path" and "boots kneading the mud and shit on the path" (p. 7).) Most probably the fresh mound is the work of someone who has no toilet at home yet can no longer postpone the call of nature, and is "afraid to wet his arse on the dewy grass"(p. 7). Such a debased act is a testament of the exploitation and alienation of the urban poor; for whom the struggle for survival disregards the basic rules of human decency.

The novel explores the menace of lack of adequate sanitation in the slums by portraying human encounter with what is meant to be disposed of. The descriptions of filth accentuate the ghastly livelihoods of the marginalized slum dwellers who are excluded from access to basic social amenities. The novel captures the gross dehumanization of not only those who have to walk on the polluted paths where the flying toilets land but also for both those who face the embarrassment of exposure while relieving themselves on the pathways when the call of nature cannot be postponed till night time. Such descriptions arouse disgust at the deplorable state of the environment the urban poor are exposed to and suggest urgency in addressing socioeconomic inequalities inherent in the contemporary Kenyan society. They make visible the plight of slum dwellers in relation to the national allocation of municipal services such as refuse and sewage collection in postcolonial Kenya.

Going Down River Road depicts human waste as an indicator of both literal and figurative immobility. Other than the discomfort and embarrassment that accompanies bowel relief for the slum dwellers; the text captures their inhibited physical mobility as they struggle to avoid the human excreta on the paths and make it to work in the city on time. A specific instance of slowed mobility on a rainy day is narrated thus: "the mud-shit dough already churned up by those ahead of him stuck to his rugged shoes" (p. 8). These images accentuate the social immobility of the disenfranchised urban poor. Figuratively, these polluted paths act as emblems of curtailed movement signifying the abandonment of a section of the populace from the national development agenda. Just as their physical walking is inhibited so is their socio-economic mobility. Scatology in *Going Down River Road* can thus be read as "an index of moral and political outrage."[24] According to Esty (1999), shit has a political vocation of drawing attention to the failures of development,[25] a function that is exemplified in *Going Down River Road.* In realistically narrating excreta Mwangi's seems to condemn the government's failure to provide infrastructure and development for the poor classes in postcolonial urban Kenya.

He contrasts the journey experiences of two categories of workers going to the same work place by use of different means of transport to comment on the social class differences and friction in postcolonial Kenya. Mr. Armajit Singh, the inspector of the building site a representative of the bourgeoisie is described as arriving at the site in a Mercedes saloon car unlike Ben who is tired from walking in the drizzle. Their conversation smacks of condescension on the part of the boss and disgruntlement for the labourer. "Vachira, vot you are doing?' 'Casual labour'. 'Wery good'... Ben wondered what was so 'wery good' about being a casual labourer, turned and took off" (p. 10). Ben's bitterness is captured in his angry walk but also emphasized in his introspection on why the rich Indian bothers to turn up so early, yet he is already immensely wealthy (p. 10). His bitterness at his plight as a casual labourer with no job security can be read as a signifier of the collective bitterness of the underprivileged workers who live on the fridges of unemployment. The disillusionment and angst of the low working classes is foregrounded in descriptions of their unmotivated mobility: "They walked slowly, quietly, their slow tortured boots kneading the mud and shit on the path. Every now and then one of them stopped to add hot urine to the dough. Then they resumed their march, the endless routine trudge, the tramp of the damned at the Persia wheel" (p. 7-8). This quote highlights

[24] Esty, D. J. (1999). Excremental Post colonialism. *Contemporary Literature* 40(1) 22-59.

[25] Joshua Esty,32

their hopelessness and dejection. The slow and unmotivated walking alludes to impeded mobilities. The text subverts the usage of a road as a metaphor of movement and change from one point to another to one of stagnation and impotence. The personification of the boots as tortured underscores the plight of the wearers of these boots as an oppressed group further described as "the endless line of forlorn workers" (p. 8). They exude misery, uncertainty, and resignation. The author portrays the characters as engaged in endless and torturous routines that foreground the stagnation, they find themselves in.

The labourers' endless and meaningless movements symbolize the vicious cycles of poverty and disillusionment that characterizes their lives while the fruit of their labour benefits the rich. The dejection in these characters draws in the reader and opens up debate on the need to address the inherent weaknesses of a capitalist economy that excludes the urban poor from infrastructural development; subjecting them to socio-economic stagnation and the resultant degradation.

5 Nocturnal Movements

The text portrays the nocturnal journeys of the disempowered underclasses as indicative of their social immobility. The labourers squander their meager wages at local drinking dens such as the infamous Karara centre and chasing after prostitutes in brothels-lifestyles that entrap them in vicious cycles of poverty and degradation that they appear incapable of extricating themselves from. The bars are depicted as a cathartic sites where "they shout, scream, jostle and try to fight," as a means of releasing pent up frustrations, after which they "stagger away into more enemies" (p. 214). These nightly routine mobilities underscore the downward spiral of a people that are already impoverished.

The novel illustrates the view of Yenjela (2023) that Alcohol consumption in the informal-sector economy serves as a survival strategy. He argues that "in the midst of myriad economic challenges that the slum dwellers face, cheap alcohol becomes a source of comfort and leisure as they navigate the cityscape (p. 184)."[26] The illusion of comfort however traps them into a state of mental stasis and unproductivity, as the labourers become perpetually hung over and disoriented. Their nocturnal movements from one bar to another are indicative of the attempts to escape the frustrations of entrapments inherent in the unproductive labour relations. The atmosphere at the illegal brew joints cures, albeit momentarily, the feelings of dejection, fear and helplessness in the drinkers' lives. It is here that Ben feels at home. He describes it as "good old Karara Centre, stuffy as hell, warm as home.

[26] Yenjela 184

Here at last are people" (p. 135). Here the irony of belonging in a dehumanizing environment captures the downward movement in the lives of the labourers who are disenchanted by vicious cycles of unrewarding labour and alienation thus seeking solace in narcotics and sex orgies.

Olalekan(2019)[27] lumps Development House and Karara Centre together in his perception of the two as "both concrete and metaphorical" (p.52). He argues that while the workers or part of the society is being underdeveloped, the building is developing. Similarly, the underdeveloped segment of the society gathers at the Karara Center for drinks like a ritual (p. 52). This argument underscores how the two spaces are intertwined as symbols of exploitation and degradation.

The novel captures the dejectedness of the drunkards by portraying their nocturnal movements from the drinking joints as "crawling home to bed" (p. 66). The narrator informs that: "Few manage to walk…they just slide out into the rubbish strewn streets and somehow get home safely to return the following day for more" (p. 66). The mobilities described in this quote carry connotations of vicious cycles of dejection and utter disillusionment for working classes fictionalized in the novel.

Once outside the joints the disempowered workers are further exposed to incidents of insecurity by another category of "night walkers" (p. 214). Robbers represent part of the enemies that they stagger into on their way home. The author professionalizes robbery as a critique of the hostile urban environment in the depiction that: "end month is business time. That is when every night walker is expected to pay night tax" (p. 207). Just as a government expects workers to pay taxes as long as they are earning, these night gangs demand for money and anything of monetary value from the already impoverished walkers. The text humorously narrates Ben's encounter with six robbers who demand for money and once he gives them his last hundred bob they are open to negotiations to return some of the money so that he would afford fare to go to work the following day and earn some more for them to collect (p. 207). Once they give him a pound he thanks them "and went on hoping he would not find another lot of non-workers to want his only pound" (p. 208). As ironical as it is to thank people who have just robbed him, the novel portrays such a response to ridicule a government that does not offer security for workers who have already paid the legitimate tax. The gratitude thus underscores the prevalence of such incidences to the extent that society has accepted the existence of robbers and has devised ways of coexisting with them. The very existence of such high numbers of

[27] Olalekan, O. O. (2019) Literature and Leadership Crises in Africa: Current Realities and Future Prospects. *Journal of Issues in Language and Literary Studies* 5(1) 42-57

criminals is a statement of the degenerating city environment within which disempowered underclasses resort to crime to survive.

6 Rural-Urban Mobility

The text dramatizes rural to urban movements that were rampant in the Kenya of the 70s as problematic to the already struggling proletariat class. Paradoxically, families in the villages assume that there is economic empowerment for the bread-winners in the towns only to encounter the dispossession of their kin. Ocholla's wives are tired of the economic challenges of rural life and embark on a journey to the city of Nairobi to confront the bread winner turned drunkard (p. 210). The movement from the village to the town carries connotations of hope for upward mobility and emotional reconnection for the estranged family hopes that are dashed in the culmination of their journey when rural poverty encounters urban poverty.

The migration of Ocholla's family from the countryside to the city exemplifies mobilities to the urban regions in response to harsh ecological factors such as drought in the rural areas of Kenya in the 70s.[28] The women report that in the village all the livestock have died from drought and diseases and "the sea of starved faces" has had to come seek solace in the city (p. 210). Under normal circumstances it would be expected that the head of the family would rejoice at being reunited with a family he has not seen for quite a while. However his socio-economic disability does not allow an environment of healthy relations. He exhibits the malady of being "trapped in the city, alienated in the rural areas."[29] The poverty in the village that the family is fleeing is manifest in the unfinished roof of the breadwinner's abode as well as the cost sharing arrangements that existed before the "intrusion" (p. 212,245).The migration of the family to the city thus inadvertently illuminates the dispossession of the poor working classes who are confounded by the Herculean task of providing for their families when they can barely survive on their own. On arrival of his massive family, Ocholla is described as "a definitely drowning man, drowning in the family mire" (p. 211). This description covers his disillusionment as a disempowered head of a family that he lacks sufficient means to provide for.

[28] Macharia, K. (2003): "Migration in Kenya and Its Impact on the Labor Market." Paper prepared for the Conference on African Migration in Comparative Perspective, (Johannesburg, South Africa: 4-7.

[29] Yenjela "Castaways," 5

The text narrates a mobility imbued with sentiments of guilt and treachery to narrate the constellation of urban and rural poverty. The journey of Kamau, Ocholla's friend, to deliver the visiting family is presented as an act of betrayal characterized by guilt and shame. Ocholla "glares at the bearer of the bad news," and rudely asks him to leave. Kamau "slinks away to his shack, very guilty and ashamed of himself" (p. 210). The irony in this reception underscores the representational role of Ocholla's family as a critique of the material conditions in a capitalist society that impedes social mobility and development of balanced families among the poor working classes in postcolonial Kenya.

The debilitating poverty in shanty land, the expected Promised Land for the poverty stricken "refugees" turns out to be a human jungle replete with prospects of starvation for both humans and stray animals, since there is no waste for the strays. "Nobody throws away any food these days. There is hardly enough for humans" (p. 208). The text satirically portrays a starving stray dog fighting for the few morsels humans have gathered to eat. The tenacity of the dog underscores the dehumanization of the urban underclasses relegated to the status of unwanted stray animals within an environment of "survival for the fittest" where the weak die or exist in subhuman conditions of socio-economic immobility.

7 Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated the precarious position of Asian Africans in postcolonial Kenya. It concludes that racial discrimination impairs the agency of workers and contributes to their socio-economic immobility. Through an exploration of the journey motif, the paper has established that the urban poor are oppressed by the rich middle classes; and that exclusion of infrastructural development in the habitations of those in the lower social categories entrenches their alienation. In the depiction of the vicious cycles of drug and sex intoxications among the low income urbanites the paper has examined the trauma that characterizes socio-economic immobility.

The essay has also explored both rural/urban migrations motivated by poverty highlighting how family disintegrations are a consequence of exploitation of the low working classes in postcolonial urban Kenya. This study concludes that there is need to address the prevailing socio-economic immobility in postcolonial urban Kenya.

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