

## LITERARY STUDY- A PALLIATIVE MEASURE IN REDRESSING SOCIETAL MALICE. A STUDY OF MEJA MWANGI'S KILL ME QUICK AND GOING DOWN THE RIVER ROAD

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### ABSTRACT

*The realization of the relationship between literary study and society has inspired literary writers to reflect in their works some features of societal malice as they observe in their societies. As an expression of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and representation of one's vision of the world, literary study is therefore conditioned by the time and occasions of its making. The ideals, values and lives of the people become subject of artistic creation. Meja Mwangi's two novels, **Kill me Quick** and **Going Down the River Road** are focal texts used to illustrate the writer's awareness of the social function of literature. The novelist takes an instance from the condition of life in Kenya to discuss the fundamental problems of the people. This paper highlights how creativity in literary study fulfills the criteria of being a tool for societal regeneration. The paper then concludes that efforts should be intensified in revitalizing reading culture among the populace*

**Keywords:** malice, society, literary study, creativity, writer,

### INTRODUCTION

Literary study is the study of the imagination and creativity of man. It x-rays human experiences through its three genres- poetry, prose and drama. It captures the need for human to create and discover creative skills which lie within him. As a living and growing art, its relevance traverses the past, present and future. As an art occupied with pursuit of creativity and aesthetics, it has functioned as an agent of social engineering and positive change in African societies.

A literary work according to Okeke is a work of imagination and of artistic creation full of evocation skills and inspiration where the writer communicates his worldview and personal perception of reality. He employs images, allusions, symbols, mythological framework and other literary artifacts to portray his vision of life and communication of human experiences (Ngumoha).

Creativity according to (Emenyi) is the attempt to evolve something new in terms of uniqueness, painstaking artifice, personal ingenuity or innovation. He agrees with the evolutionary school of thought which associates the origin of human life with the concept of creativity as divine initiative and plan through which creation came into existence. This view of creativity is reflected in works of renaissance writers and in this scenario God becomes the classic creator and the essence of creation.

Creativity as an imaginative frame is anchored within space and time, hence a creative artist investigates, confronts, informs and directs the society through the

craft of writing. His creative skills are shown in how he blends imagination, ingenuity and social reality in the construction of meaning without deviating from the bases of group experience. He affects the populace through the skillful use of language in portrait of reality as he uses his skills to infuse certain attribute into his characters so as to make them enact predetermined roles. These roles as Emenyi further highlights can shape public opinion positively or negatively because creativity as an intellectual phenomenon is socially defined because it is an avenue of seeing or perceiving the universe.

These two texts by Meja Mwangi **Kill me Quick** and **Going Down The River Road** give useful insight into the link between creativity and the writer's preoccupation of delineating how the society can be transformed so that people's standard of living can be enhanced. Recently various governments of various nations have adopted 2030 Sustainable Development Goals to tackle multifaceted societal challenges confronting human life. It is therefore expected that literary study if given a pride of place in the annals of events will go a long way to create conducive and healthy environment for human survival.

### Literary study and Societal Malice

According to Megbawon contemporary societies across the world are faced with myriads of prevalent and diverse societal ills that have possible future implications. These ills are alarming and worrisome and therefore must be checkmated. The need for

societal regeneration for a better future becomes imperative. Literary study responds to the ideals, values and lives of people at a particular time and these become subject of artistic creation. Irrespective of the thematic thrust and rhetorical devices employed, the preoccupation of African literature remains an attempt to appraise the challenges confronting human existence. African writers having found themselves in the society are involved in some kind of quest to justify their existence in that society. They create awareness of societal norms, needs, values and expectations. They speak against societal ills, educate, train and create awareness of social change. Soyinka sees literary study as an instrument to show social malice and create new vision. To Premchand literary study that does not arouse in us a critical spirit, does not satisfy our spiritual and intellectual needs nor awaken our sense of beauty, and stimulate positive change in us cannot be termed literary study. Ngugiwa Thiongo sees African writer as a sensible needle that records with varying degrees of accuracy and success the conflicts and tensions in the changing society. Literary artists are thereby charged with the arduous task according to Megbowon of transforming their societies, arousing men and women from their apathy and servile attitudes and delivering them from the shackles of enslaving traditions, religious dogmatism, political dictatorship as well as other social vices.

It is expedient to point out that African writers according to Killam have come to the recognition that they have a special role to play in suggesting the basic values of a society in reconciling the individual with his past and present culture in creating understanding and a sense of balance for promotion of tolerance. They also try to unravel new ways of seeking understanding in the height of traditional values as they are confronted with the impact of modern ideals.

Commenting on the relationship between a writer and his society, Nwahunaya sees him as an ombudsman of societal values whose voice sings of the injustices and social misconducts perpetuated in the land with the aim of redressing these evils and thereby bringing about the establishment of a more stable and morally conscious environment. In confirmation to the above Otaide as cited by Nwahunaya sees a writer as being under an obligation to recount the experiences of the people both past and present so that his people will keep track of their historical trajectory and if possible avoid repeating the same mistakes from their past. Often the message he conveys is embodied within an entertainment framework so that even at the height of excitement he still warns his people the dangers of certain behavioral excesses since he shares the same linguistic repertoire with them, thus, the relationship between literary study and society as well as the writer's place within it is established. It is this bond between literature and society that Ngugi projects

when he opines that literary study is given vent and area of concern by the society that produces it. With this in mind according to Jinanwa, Practitioners of literary arts have therefore considered themselves as people entrusted with the mandate of highlighting the ill points of society with a view to wielding a regenerating influence on it. Achebe is of the view that the writer as a being with heightened sensibility must be aware of the faintest nuances in injustice in human relation. This social relevance of writers can be discernable in their writings where they demonstrate their awareness of these changes taking place in their environment and so use the resources of their art to address them.

Some writers beam their literary searchlight on human's survival strategies in a fractured society as ours. Such writers look at human as he lives in the society, and issues affecting his survival. For instance Soyinka's *the interpreters* exposes the nature of post-independence inequality and disillusionment. According to Oko he uses many layers of consciousness to explore the nature of the individual adjustment in a basically hypocritical and materialistic society.

Ousmane in *God's Bits of Wood* shows the commitment of a writer in liberating the masses in the midst of banalization and impoverishment of human existence. Armah in the *Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* satirizes the political position in Africa as he focuses his attention on the new African who now occupy the political positions vacated by the former colonizers to trample on Afro cherished values. Nguigi's *A Grain of wheat* projects the sufferings of the peasants under British rule which is comparable to the suffering of the Israelites in the hand of Pharaoh. Emecheta in her novels depicts the issue of gender segregation against women and men's domination over women as a result of their privileged position which they used to oppress women. Time and space will fail us if we go further to chronicle African literary works that attest to the fact that through the prism of human imagination, the ontological essence of literary study is ascertained in terms of the extent to which it recycles social experiences and transforms them into an aesthetic relevant proposition.

#### **Societal Malice Discernable in the Focal Texts- Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* and *Going Down The River Road***

These two focal novels were written by a famous contemporary novelist Meja Mwangi twice winner of the Kenyatta prize for literature. He decries the contemporary status of the Kengan masses who are victims of capitalist exploitation. He takes an instance from the condition of life in Kenya to discuss the fundamental problems of the people who are politically suppressed and economically deflated. The struggle and setback that constitute his creative interest evolve out of the moral decadence as well as the materially driven age that marks the status of his

society. There is physical, economical and psychological pain suffered by the people as a result of the social deprivations which they experience as these further create socio-economic dichotomies. As a result of inequality in accessing basic social amenities, Meja, Maina, Nyutho Mwangi and other youths, who are the major characters in *Kill me Quick* migrated to the city for greener pasture since they are armed with academic qualification little did they know according to Nwokochah that a world of difference exists between the platitude taught in the classroom and the realities in the society as they discover to their chagrin that white collar jobs which ensure decent living have become the prerogative of the oppressor class. The oppressed like Meja and Maina are forced to find solace in a decrepit and putrid environment in the urban setting where people who are considered less humans dwell. The writer paints vividly the various experiences of the disinherited inheritors of the Uhuru. Their subservient nature is more pronounced in their relationship with their white employers who through their black supervisors expose them to excruciating and tortuous hard labor like Meja and Maina in *Kill me Quick* as well as Ben and Ocholla in *Going Down The River*. Segregational tendencies are evident in the complexion of the masses as typical blacks are more dehumanized and traumatized than those whose skin colors are lighter. Again there is evidence of struggle for supremacy between traditional life and the modern values imposed by the imperialists.

The new black middle class who stepped into the shoes of the white rulers further unleashed mayhem on the already dark poverty stricken masses whose belief that modern days newly independent Kenya will offer them opportunities to prosper hits brick wall. Life in the urban jungle is characterized by violence, insecurity and other social vices. People are treated not only as societal garbage but also as cheap and unexpendable commodities as exemplified in Boi's character who is sent by the white employers to recruit Kenyan as cheap workforce. As Udo rightly observes the novel *Kill me Quick* paints a grim picture of the future which may be populated by mentally deranged people as a result of the violence done in their psyche by the socio-political and economic system in operation. To O'rielle as quoted by Udo the novel clearly identifies the social and political problems which lead to despair and disillusionment and drive many young African into crime and delinquency as they struggle to survive in a world that offers them no hope and succour.

*Going Down the River Road* continues in a similar vein. It highlights the disillusioned and disenfranchised lifestyle of the Kenya working class. A group of labourers are hired to construct a twenty-five story building that is ironically named 'Development house'. The writer further uses the construction of this luxurious house to project the

exploitation and subjugation associated with the downtrodden in the society. Those who laboured to erect this edifice live in squalor while huge resources are being expended in its erection. The completion of this house will spell doom for the labourers because they will face unemployment.

The novel goes further to highlight the high handedness of opulent landlords who live in mansions but build ramshackle houses for people at the lower strata of socio-economic pyramid. These houses are leased to them on an exorbitant rate. They are denied the privilege of seeking protection from the law enforcement agency. The traumatic experience of the vegetable hawker who suffers unjustifiable eviction alongside with his family who are seen sitting by the road side goes to buttress the fact that even the police is in alliance with the oppressor class to assault and dehumanize the oppressed. Some of the victims of this oppressive society are compelled to accept their fate while others try to show resistance and rebellion in various dimensions and colourations. Prostitution becomes an avenue for survival. Female prostitutes according to Jinanwa use sexual weapon to get back their own, partly as a way of survival and partly as a way of expressing their anger at an uncaring society. The writer exposes the pains, misery and brutality which prostitutes of various ages undergo in their helplessness and utter desperation to eke out a living. The typologies of the perpetrators of this social malaise are Delilah in *Kill me Quick*, Wini and the Karara center prostitutes in *Going Down the River Road*. Wini, Ben's girlfriend who has a baby at the age of fourteen is forced to elope with her white boss because of her inability to cater both for herself and the baby.

Another dimension of this social malaise as reflected in the two novels is the issue of criminal activities. Meja and Maina in *Kill me Quick* are amateur criminals who later become die-hard criminals like Razor all in an attempt to survive and this spelt out doom for them as they all end up in prison. The migrants to the city in recollection of their, disengagement from their roots decided to make U-turn back home. Their homecoming is greeted with aversion because of their inability to meet up with monetary expectation of their Kiths and Kins. Maina in his frantic effort for reintegration into his family milieu meets with hostility which forced him to commit murder thereby showing his deep-seated aversion against a society that ill-treated him. This dastard act is an expression of a miscalculated and misdirected violence. From all indications, it is apparent that the personal challenges confronting majority of the masses are set against the background of widespread social challenges as can be seen from some activities explicated in the novels like the wrecking of the joints by the patrons, the barman's refusal to close at the designated time as well as making the joint a beehive for all manner of

atrocities. These antrums displayed can best be seen as an offshoot of the people's dissociated sensibility which at this point is the consequences of their rejection by their society and their own disenchantment and frustration with the system. The social implication in both novels is that the moral life of the masses in post-Independence Africa would have been better if the social and economic circumstances were conducive to their existence. The writer further paints a grim picture according to Udo of the future which may be populated by mentally deranged people as a result of the violence done in their psyche by the prevailing socio-political and economic system. This paper calls for collective and pragmatic approach in addressing the urgent demands of the society. This Pragmatic approach has to do with the provision of food, shelter, security and other social amenities. The writer reflecting patriotism in these texts, has taken a giant stride in ensuring that his works create a forum where people live in an unmolested environment. He uses his artistic endowment and creative intuition to foster national consciousness and cultural integration. As Nnolim rightly opines our most valued export commodity is not Petroleum product but our literary study which has won every imaginable international prize including Nobel Prize. The aesthetic experience derivable from it fosters mutual sympathy and understanding which helps people to come together for a common purpose.

Literary artists who write within a particular era of African history reflect the dominant nature of the societal contention. They see themselves as custodians of the culture and values of the people. The texts examined portray a dichotomous world of narratives and characters with different ideologies and attitudes. Writers of these literary creativities that depict societal malice should take their positions against all forms of oppression, brutalities and unwarranted violence against the masses. This according to Nnolim calls for some measure of commitment, social consciousness and some degree of courage.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Since literary study is recreational, the government should establish recreational centers where literary works especially the ones on societal challenges are on display for people to access. The government should further encourage literary artists to come up with artistic creative texts that would motivate the populace into positive lifestyle as they imbibe the following virtues from those texts, cultural assimilation, conflict resolution strategies, tolerance as well as development of desirable attribute.

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