



THE COSTS OF URBANIZATION AND POVERTY IN MEJA MEWANGI'S *KILL ME QUICK*

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ABSTRACT



Africa after the colonialism was an entirely new face. The rapid growth in industry and urbanization spelled many difficult situations for the Africans. They looked at the city with a great hope. However the prevailing conditions were not favourable for the advancement of the downtrodden. They were denied the rights of growth. The present paper tries to depict the pathetic livelihood conditions of the poor. To project the stark reality of the developing cities of Africa is one of the objectives of this paper. Consequently how does the life and poverty has shaped the life of the Africans is also a key concern of this paper. The plight the poor and the wretchedness of their world is elaborated. Meja and Maina are the teenagers who visit the city of Nairobi with great hope for earning their livelihood. The novel portrays their pathetic life. Towards the end of the novel both of them are craving for the death as the only rescue from this tyrannical world. The novel ends with the view that if Maina would not have been caught by the police, he would have certainly made a difference to his wretched world and have wiped out his identity of being a poor and a criminal. Thus the themes of urbanization and poverty are discussed extensively in this paper.

Keywords: Colonial Power, Urbanization, Wretchedness, tyranny, Shanty Lands

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**INTRODUCTION**

The prevailing conditions in Africa after the independence movement have changed rapidly and radically. After the colonialism the African society has been continually deteriorated on the ethical grounds. This has been reflected through Literature widely and extensively in the contemporary African Literature. Furthermore it discusses the colonialism and neo-colonialism and its profound effects upon the class structures in colonizing and colonized societies.

Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* (1973) is a novel commenting on the poor conditions of the colonized Africans after the Independence. *Kill Me Quick* is a first-person narrative. It is a pathetic story of the two teenagers Meja and Maina. The boys came to the city with a dream. They have come to the city of Nairobi with the hope that their education will offer them a satisfactory job and with which they can support their families. But very soon they realized that they are like the unwanted flies in that city. The city of Nairobi changed a lot after the independence and recognized as the city of hopes but unfortunately fails to accommodate these two. Coincidentally Meja met Maina on the backstreets of the city where all the filth and dirt of the city is dumped. They have been shooed off from the offices or by the managers. 'NO VACANCY' was the board they have shown all the time. Unfortunately all their efforts of earning fail miserably. Eventually Maina is caught by the robber's gang. Meja falls prey to the thievery and ultimately both of them land in the prison. The corruption has been practiced so rampantly that the life of the common man almost turned into the hellish circumstances.

The opening scene of the novel describes Meja and Maina as the teenager boys, sitting on the wall observing the people who are indifferent to the others. They observe that people are pacing the market without heeding at the wretched.

Meja sat by the ditch swinging his legs this way and that. A few people passed by engrossed in their daily problems and none of them gave the lanky youth a thought. But the searching eyes of Meja missed nothing. They scrutinized the ragged beggars who floated ghostly past him as closely as they watched the smart pot-bellied executives

wrinkling their noses at the foul stench of the backyards. And between these two types of beings, Meja made comparisons."(KMQ p 1)

The novel *Kill Me Quick* portrays the urbanization and its costs that the city dwellers have to pay. Its protagonists, the adolescent school-leavers Meja and Maina, represent one of the major social problems of Nairobi: the growing number of orphaned or destitute boys who roam Nairobi's streets, surviving on handouts and by their wits. However it is not only the urbanization that is responsible for the wretchedness of these teenagers but the insensitivity of the city dwellers is also responsible for this. The real culprits in making these two innocent boys into the criminals are the societal conditions. The bourgeoisie have not to be responsible for their social responsibility of uplifting the masses. The boys struggle a lot for getting a job in the city. The protagonists, Meja and Maina cannot get the job that their academic qualification entitles them to. Unfortunately they did not get even the sweepers job in the whole city of Nairobi. In fact they showed willingness to sweep and wash dishes and chop wood. They were continually denied by the Main street dwellers. The inconsiderate and impatient manager have kicked them off and some of them have simply put it on a door board the warning sign- NO VACANCY, HAKUNA KAZI" (KMQ p5). Their visit to the city proves to be a complete disillusionment. Tired and hopeless by the continual denials for the job they prefer to accept that the backstreet as the only abode for them.

Their attempt to sell the scrap to earn money was also failed. The scrap dealer when realizes the helplessness of these two teenagers tries to cheat them. The boys were initially not willing to sell the scrape to the old man but it was their sheer poverty made them to agree the old man's price.

Competed against the rest of the world, the boys had no chance. So they turned to other things. Old and battered aluminum utensils, copper wiring, bottles, cans and general scrap metal were to be found in plenty in the rubbish bins. They collected these and sold them to some person who had the privilege of reaching the big dealers.



Everything of any economic value went via the middle man to enormous scrap metal dumps in the outskirts of the city. From there only the devil could tell where it next landed.

During this big business season the boys learned one thing. Whatever you did, no matter how you did it, nothing ever paid. Everybody tried to cheat you, from the ragged scrap metal buyer to the barrel woman for whom you chopped wood. (KM Q p10)

During this business deal the boys have realized that there is no fair business. All the efforts of earning money will be via through an agent and who will be the real profit seeker. This example is suggestive of the typical capitalistic class which believes in profit maximization irrespective of the needs of the masses. This was the wretched conditions of independent Kenya. It was a sheer disillusionment of the countrymen because they have imagined something else after the Independence movement. Their dreams were rejuvenated after the long fought Mau Mau war. Jomo Kenyatta (1968), in his *Suffering without Bitterness*, reiterates the aspirations and yearnings of the Kenyan people from the Mau Mau war:

Our march to freedom has been long and difficult. There have been times of despair, when only the burning conviction of the rightness of our cause has sustained us. Today, the tragedies and misunderstandings of the past are behind us. Today, we start on the great adventure of building the Kenya nation (1968: 212).

However the prevailing conditions are not the usual conditions but it were the consequences of the colonial dominance which now seems to be over but it has a strong impact on the contemporary African class system. One of the major role players of this situation is the mediators who were loyal to the foreign rulers than to their own people. Frantz Fanon calls these people as the local watch dogs. The people of this new Creole were prominently identified on their ability to perform the role of "internuncio" between the colonial power and the increasingly enlarged electorate.

The novel progress with their meeting with Boi, an agent of the White man though it brings them new hopes and a turning point to their lives. Initially both of them are skeptical about accepting Boi's offer of giving them the job on the farmland with the accommodation but Meja can't afford to say "no" because he has to send the money to his parents in village. The problem of accommodation for temporarily was being solved as Boi, had promised them the ration and the accommodation. However the location and the condition of the hut will speak volumes about their living conditions:

A respectable distance from the farmhouse and its always creaking windmill was the farmlands village. The huts were crowded together to save land for the more important wheat and maize fields. The huts resigned as the occupants who day by day toiled on the farm for their miserable pay. All around the camp chicken runs, dog kennels and vegetable gardens fought for space. From early morning when the sun rose and there was a little hope for the future, dust, chickens, mongrels and the children played together and waited for the sun to go down and mother to come back from her work in the faraway fields, and prepare the only meal for the day" (KMQ p16).

The writer describes the life of Meja and Maina as "It was in this village, where life made no boundaries between little children and puppies, that Maina and Meja were to live". The misery and the inhuman condition under which they live is best reflected in their huts which they share with the rats, bedbugs, and fleas.

"They were given a hut which was located near the dustbins. "Meja's hut was flea-land, and the whole circular wall practically plastered with bed bugs. The floor lay as when it was first created with the rest of the world, rough, corrugated and at least a foot deep in fine dust. Evil black soot hung from the roof like giant stalactites, so heavy that the thatching was caving inthe window was much wider and taller than the



door and about a foot off the ground".(KMQ p16)

It is these miserable and poor conditions of the masses that Mewangi describes so as to acquaint the readers with the pitiable conditions of the masses. The description of the kitchen appliances from the hut is a further indication of their deprived situations.

The only furniture in the room were the two packing crates they sat on, and a camping type rack in one corner, on which they kept their utensils (two tin mugs, two tin plates, a huge can and two aluminum cooking pots) On one side of the hut was Meja's bed , and Maina's on the other, each a collection of sacks and rags thrown on the flea ridden earth floor. The fire was built between three large stones in the middle. "That is what I call a good meal," Maina said". (KMQ p25)

The major culprit behind such poor conditions of the masses is the white man who has politically rescued the land but still owns the capitalistic interests through the local representatives or the local watchdogs. The African society after the independence was especially suffering from such local watchdogs who were often the agents of the white man. Their interference in the political and administrative system has often trifled the progress of the nation. The boys when started leading their life at the white man's farmland, they had to confront the hurdle and that was Mr Foreman. Mr Foreman is a representative of the white boss. The wages of sixty shillings for a month was not sufficient even to satisfy the boys' basic needs. As the boys were getting bare minimum salary so sending the money to the family was a thing of distant concern for them. It also made them feels guilty for their inability to earn the money and fulfill the expectations of their family.

The sixty shillings they were paid each month was hardly enough to exist on. But by scaling his needs almost to the level of starvation he did manage to save at least one pound every month. His family would need at least twenty times that amount for their daily needs each month. That to Meja

meant that they were living at minus twenty pounds every month(Meja Maina) so they rarely talked about their homes and family, all they thought of was food and a place to lay their needs when night came. And the world was dark, cold, lonely and miserable. (KMQ p 22) .

This is something Mewangi underlines boldly that though there were educated people in and around the city of Nairobi but it failed to provide them with the opportunities of the growth. The boys' joblessness and even the jobs with almost petty cash show the nation's utter poverty. It is further a pungent attack on the education system also that it had failed to prove the boys as the bread winners. Meja reveals his agony in the following words:

"You know I have been thinking, Meja said, "I am getting tired of being thrown about by everybody. One minute, half- ration, the next half -pay. It is getting so that I cannot stand it any longer. If one is working he must also eat. If this goes on I will....." (KMQ p 26).

This sort of craving for food made Maina to look for some other alternative for survival. However these were not the long lasting conditions of the boys. They were not going to tolerate the injustice of Boi anymore. The thought of leaving the farmland haunted the boys and they finalized to return to the Backstreets: their own backstreets.

"Everything has an end, he said, trying to keep up his carefree mood. Meja was with him on that one point. Everything has an end. Their guerrilla warfare against Boi was over and their heaven of peace lost forever. They were jobless again and would soon be heading back to the backstreets. No more personal hut, no more home, no more flour and sweet skimmed milk, no more sweet smelling dust-covered rags for a bed and no more yes ,even Boi." (KMQ p 39)

The following incident will add to the acute scarcity of food being experienced by these poor boys. One day Meja is trying to hunt for food; he grabs a rotten orange from the supermarket, he is caught and beaten brutally by the people. Maina tried to rescue him but fails. Further he is eventually caught by the robber's gang, whose leader is Razor.



Maina has been dragged into a robber's gang in such a way that though reluctant he has to rob for his survival. In the course of time he had learned and practiced the tricks of theft and robbery. "Maina ultimately decides to join and live with a gang of young criminals in Shanty-Lands---a slum. However even the gang of young criminals in Shanty land uses violence as a means of persuasion, by threatening to harm one or inflict injury if the victim is not willing to part with his or her property. In most of the instances this group is made up only of what is socially and in the grammar of the judicial system known as "petty thieves" and pick pockets. At this stage, there exists only a nascent disregard for the law and the moral order --they only steal in order to satisfy the most basic of needs. Delinquency leads to involvement with street gangs and more serious crimes; in the end, Maina is convicted of murder and will likely hang, while Meja languishes in prison.

The pathos and helplessness of the boys shows that the people have to live in this atmosphere of indifference, psychological tumult, like paranoia, recidivism, criminality, kleptomania, and the like. Everywhere the ordinary person turns to the encounter of class hate, rejection, discord and fear. S/He goes through this ordeal until s/he dies or is put in goal for life. It is the needy and the downtrodden can endure endless suffering; their patience sometimes attains epic proportions. As a result of the struggle by members of the society for survival and accumulation of surplus, the emergence of class conflicts becomes inevitable. This has led to the polarization of the society into classes or strata (the haves and the have-nots). The ordeals with Boi, and the Foreman finally makes them turned to Backstreet again which is their safest abode. Now they are fully convinced with the belief that the backstreets is the only abode for them. His actions represent progression in the lives of these two young men from a state of deprivation to a state of desperation.

CONCLUSION

This novel can be studied as a social document of the contemporary African society. The protagonist who ends up with the saying "Kill Me Quick" is symbolic of the tyrannical conditions of the postcolonial urban African society. Independence has not given them the liberty and equality.

Moreover, Urbanization has increased the problems of the deprived classes. Unfortunately at the end both the friends meet in the prison which they were consciously trying to avoid. This shows the utter poverty and urbanization has added to their wretchedness.

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