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Youth Despair in the Post-colonial Novel: A Study of Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*

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ABSTRACT:
This paper examines the complex nature of youths' despair experience in the post-independence African countries as contextualized in Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the cross*. This plight based on the exploitation and all kinds of abuses perpetrated by those elites who were meant to help their countrymen enjoy the fruits of the freedom they fought and shed blood for. This study shows how, in the considered narratives, these unemployed youths of both sexes, longing for better living conditions, took refuge in cities where their plight worsens so that they unfortunately slipped into a whirlpool of crime. A resignation which brings about suicide attempts among the youths.

Keywords: Contextualization - Disillusioned hero- Exploitation - Unemployment - Youth Despair - Resignation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since, youth despair has been one of the most recurrent topical issues throughout the world. It is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon for it affects societal and economic dimensions of life. In spite of the sociological implications it may have, youth disillusionment also deserves to be analyzed within a literary angle. It is one of the thematic concerns in most recent African urban literature as Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1975:47) observes: "*Youth disillusionment with the ruling elite is to be found in recent works of most African writers.*" In effect, this topic has for long crystallized the attentions to the point that it has profusely inspired literary works, specifically those by writers of the second generation such as Meja Mwangi and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o among the others who make of literature a conceptual instrument of awareness. For they endeavored seeking to reflect social reality in interestingly subversive but also empower ways, showing then a unique way of dealing with difficult and burning issues.

Though all the misfortunes of the African continent: tribal wars, diseases, and violence of all kinds are said to be 'girls' of the European intrusion and continuing influence in Africa, Meja Mwangi, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, like other postcolonial novelists, still opine that Africans can longer continue neither to blame their ex-colonizers for the delay of their taking-off nor keep on idealizing Africa as the defenders of the Negritude did; even though, they had their own reasons to do it at that time. As a reminder, their predecessors, those 'cantors of Negritude', endeavored idealizing Africa by "*recreating and exalting the African past not only for the enlightenment of our detractors (the settlers) but above all, for our own people's education*"(Chinua Achebe, 1973: p.8). Rather, Meja Mwangi, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, yet undertake a bilateral criticism. As much they blame the ex-colonizers for the invasion and the looting of Africa, as much they energetically denounce the post-colonial African policies. This position is corroborated by Edward Said (1993:19) when he says:

> Blaming the Europeans sweepingly for the misfortunes of the present is not much of an alternative. What we need to do is to look at the matters as a network of interdependent histories that it would be inaccurate and senseless to repress, useful and interesting to understand.

These two Kenyan writers can be viewed as those African intellectuals, if not the most prominent East African novelists who successfully play their role as writers in a new nation. Many critics and scholars agree to read their novels as 'social mirrors' that these authors hold up through the unsafe and unbearable streets of the post-independence Kenya; a mirror which not only reflects their tribesmen's real living conditions but, a mirror in which they somehow look at themselves as Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1981:188) states: "*I have written about and believed in a Kenya for Kenyans, (...) I have attempted to hold up a mirror through which Kenyans can look at themselves in their past, their present and perhaps in their future*."

This study explores the fictional representation of youth despair in *Kill Me Quick* and *Devil on the Cross*, two novels respectively by Meja Mwangi and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. It purports to examine the two author's views about the plight of young Kenyans of both sexes taken as the microcosm of the masses in the post-independence African countries as they are contextualized in the selected novels. The hypothesis backing up this study is that the exploration of narratives under consideration illustrates how young Africans are still targets of the ruling class in their own African societies.

Concerning the review literature, it is worth noticing that though scores of literary texts portrays situation of poverty and even of disillusionment, focusing on the novels of our corpus but individually, there is relatively small quantity of critical studies representing youth's despair with regard to both novels from a literary perspective. Agho Jude, explored aspects of disillusionment and alienation with a focus on selected novels of three Post-colonial writers: Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Alex La Guna and Sembene Ousmane. His text shows how the selected works of literature capture some of the complexities of the route by heroines (in situations of adversity) have to navigate a way towards survival through treacherous socio-economic circumstances. Similarly, examining the post-independence disillusionment in contemporary African fiction with regard to Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*, Ayobami Kehinde (2004:238, 229) observed:

> Mwangi's fiction falls within the body of literary works which goes by the general appellation of "literature of disillusionment", which is premised on the observation that experience in our neo-colonial societies ultimately reduces to a dance of death, in which history is the major celebrant cast in the role of death. […]Hence, *Kill Me Quick*, like many other postcolonial African novels, reveals an atmosphere of fear, hate, humiliation and an aura of repression, in forms of arrest, exile and execution.

The present study, as said earlier, undertakes an analytical investigation of literary representation in order to show how Meja Mwangi and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o contextualize youth despair in their works of fiction.

Since the gist of this paper is to focus on the manifestations of disillusionment, the Marxist approach seems the most helpful perspective to highlight, in a more extended way, character's expectations in order to show how great is their disenchantment in the novels analyzed here. Indeed, while liberal humanist criticism, for instance, tends to view the text as the product of the writer himself who is solely responsible for creating meaning, Marxist critics, however, see it as a cultural product to be understood in terms of what Antonio Gramsci (1981:199), calls "*the determining weight of history*". A Marxist practitioner seeks to establish the significance of the material circumstances in which the text is produced and consumed, and insists that aesthetics are not distinct from politics and economics. Jon Elster (1986:277), quoting Karl Marx, helps buttress our position when he writes:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. [---] It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness.

For this theoretician, man's consciousness is influenced by his relationships with his counterparts in society. This means that the context is the key to more insights into a given text. For, a writer translates social facts into literary ones. He integrates the language of literature into that of sociology and finds the social equivalent of literary facts. Besides, he presents a socially reflective text, which is not less than an element of socialist realism.

Three points will be considered in the completion of this study. Prior scanning youths' resignation and resort to criminality as a symptom of their disenchantment, it is worth showing how *Kill Me Quick* and *Devil on the Cross* expose the plight and the despair of both young men and girls in the present day political set up in Kenya taken as the microcosm post-independence Africa.

1- Jacintha Warĩĩnga: the Unsprung Heroine

Any reader conversant with *Devil on the Cross* easily infers that Warĩĩnga is unquestionably a disillusioned heroine from the opining of the novel. For, when delving into, one meets her overwhelmed by a series of ordeals. Warĩĩnga's misfortunes begin at her very tender age with the detention of her parents. It is while taken by her aunt as caregiver that the young girl is offered to a seemingly helpful lover, the Old Rich man from Ngorika whose multiplied grisly actions make the teenager lady desperate and push her be at fault just like an 'unsprung heroine'. For, this old man makes her pregnant and consequently urges her to drop out school and gets deprived from the chance to study, her only key to repay the corrupt society.

The rationale behind the choice of the heroine (Warĩĩnga) as a significant source of study in the paper finds credence in Simon Gikandi's observations (2000:219):

> The significance of Warĩĩnga in the novel perhaps lies in the way she operates within and outside the national allegory. For a start, she appears to us not as the familiar woman in the national romance (the custodian of tradition) [.. .]She is introduced to us an individual in an acute state of crisis, contemplating suicide. She can then be described as a new kind of woman because she is not asked to perform a symbolic function in the national narrative: she is an individual.

Warĩĩnga's life collapses a certain Friday, viewed as the "dark Friday" of her destiny. Yet in morning, she has already been dismissed for refusing sex to Boss Kĩhara, her employer and, dumped in the evening by her University lover John Kimwara who, instead of comforting her, is mistakenly and unfairly blames her for a suspected sexual relationship with her boss. The following Saturday, Warĩĩnga is evicted from her apartment by a group of thugs for refusing to pay an exorbitant amount of rent unexpectedly demanded to her.

Faced with these problems, she heads back to Illmorog as thoughts stream through her mind. As can be seen, Warĩĩnga starts pondering over her misfortune very early and the scary possibility of the end of her studies looms large in her mind to the extent she becomes traumatized. Trauma pushes her to think suicide would be a solution to her plight as she notices that her dearest ideal is trampled upon. Her depression reaches a pivotal pitch when she gets pregnant from the Rich Old Man from Ngorika. As a matter of fact, despairing her abandoned pregnant state, Warĩĩnga attempts to throw herself before a train. All her suicide attempts fail for there is always a 'savior' to lend a hand to Warĩĩnga's fading life, a way to strengthen her mind to facing every life challenge as evidenced in the following passage:

> A city bus came speeding towards her. Warĩĩnga shut her eyes. Her body shuddered. She swallowed a lump, and her heart began to beat as if to the rhythm of a prayer: in times of troubles, do not O Father, look the other way. Do not hide your face from at this time of tears…Now…receive me… Suddenly Warĩĩnga heard a voice within her: why are you trying to kill yourself again? Who instructed you that your work on earth is finished? Who has told you that your time is up? (*Devil on the Cross*, p.12)

Yet, the Gicaandi player, that improvisational street performer who sings and dances, introduces us Warĩĩnga as a defeatist character confused and even alienated from the notion of herself as powerful in her own right for:

> Warĩĩnga was convinced that her appearance was the root cause of all her problems. Whenever she looked at herself in the mirror she thought herself very ugly. What she hated most was her blackness, so she would disfigure her body with skin-lightening creams like Ambi and Snowfire, forgetting the saying: That which is born black will never be white. Now her body was covered with light and dark spots like the guinea fowl. Her hair was splitting, and it had browned to the colour of moleskin because it had been straightened with red-hot iron combs. Warĩĩnga also hated her teeth. They were a little stained; they were not as white as she would have liked them to be. She often tried to hide them, and she seldom laughed openly. (*Devil on the Cross*, p.11)

However, Warĩĩnga's despair is also manifest in her restless tramping for a job in a post-independence country where women commodification is almost officialized and intensified especially with capitalists sheltering many hotels as hideouts of prostitutes. Indeed, if there is an up-to-date activity that Kenyan politicians are interested in, it is unquestionably the building of hotels in order to extend prostitution and to make a lot of profit.

Taken as the microcosm of all post-independence African's young girls tramping for a job, Warĩĩnga is victim of sexual harassment. Indeed, young girls' professional abilities are then always ignored by employers in favor of their physical appearance and their sexual appeal. For "*before anything, they will have to accept to sleep with their prospective employer*."(*Devil on the Cross*, p.86). This is what Warĩĩnga learns from Boss Kĩhara's sweet tongues:

> Ah, Kareendi, jobs are very hard to come by these days: But a girl like you ... it shouldn't be too difficult to find something for you to do. But, Kareendi, a matter like this can't be finalized in the office. Let's go across to the Modern Love Bar and Lodging to discuss the question more fully. (*Devil on the Cross*, p.19)

As the story unfolds, it is reported that in her restless job hunt, the only condition imposed on her is to yield her thighs and exchange sex with her potential employer. Consequently, she fails again to get a job from the second boss simply because she is determined to make no beds as the narrator pathetically describes it:

> She enters another office. She finds there another Mr Boss. The smiles are the same, the questions are the same, the rendezvous is the same. The Modern Love Bar has become the main employment Bureau for girls, and women's thighs are the tables on which contracts are signed. (*Devil on the Cross*, p.19)

From the forgoing, one can easily infer how Warĩĩnga's misfortune evidences this bad behaviour of the black leaders who treat women more than sexual toys. She the teenager who, had always dreamed of being an engineer sees now all her dreams shattered. For her dreamed brilliant carrier seems to be doomed to violence as a consequence of her being victim of family breakup coupled with the bad influence of those adults, likes the Old Rich man from Ngorika who were meant to look after the disables. Unfortunately, they had no 'keen eye' for dependents. Rather, these 'sexually obsessive' seemingly helpful new African leaders have all their activities only turning around flirting with women as she pathetically testifies:

> […] Then I wandered into shop after shops, looking for one that employed black men. A black mam. There was a black man in the shop. My heart lifted with hope. I told him all troubles. Can you believe it? He collapsed with laughter! He told me that the only job he could offer me was that of spreading my legs, that women with mature bodies were experts at that job. I felt a tear drop to the ground. (*Devil on the Cross*, p.125)

In this quotation, sentences such as "My heart lifted with hope" and "I felt a tear drop to the ground" epitomize the plight of young girls whose success at work is in direct proportion not with their abilities or performances but with to their beauty and serviability to quench men's sexual appetites. The novel is even replete with tales of men's unsatisfied sexual desires, tales of

their exaggerations with women's intimacy, pretending that they are doomed to that. Indeed, these sexual "maniacs" loose every pretence of dignity and are ready to quench their libido everywhere. In this respect, Kĩhaahu Wa Gatheeca, one of the competitor at The Feast of Modern Theft and Robbery, brings more light on what politicians really feel about this shameful practice:

> I like other people's wives. One gets such a glorious feeling of victory. I'm particularly good at bourgeois women. They never resist. [...] A cunt is not salt or soap that will dissolve or disappear after use. I have baptized them Ready-to- Yield. They aren't expensive. [...] My sports: counting money in the evening, playing golf on Saturdays and Sundays and, of course, playing about with the thighs of the Ready –to- Yield when I have time. (*Devil on the Cross*, p.110)

From the above quotation, one easily understands that the important part of Ngũgĩ's intention is to display aspects of social violence inflicted upon young ladies by their seemingly helpful lovers. Indeed, they are accordingly taken as 'sugar-girls' or 'Ready-to-Yield', that is to say, objects of pleasure when they are not simply reduced to mere items of voyeuristic attention or economic commodities, cheaper and entrancingly beautiful, well appreciated by the paedophile western tourists are ready to spend all their money. In this connection, Robin Mwaũra, pathetically reports to his passengers how prostitution develops as tourism flourishes in post-independent Kenya:

> On another day an American tourist hired this car. This American was really old. His face was full of deep valleys. And one the other parts of his body, the folds of the skin lay in rolling layers. But he had with him an African girl, so tiny she could have been a schoolgirl? They sat in the back. I drove them all round Nairobi for an hour or so. They didn't talk much. And they didn't do a lot either. All he did was to keep pressing and pinching the little girl thighs, and the girl massaged his face-sometimes her fingers got completely lost in the folds of his skin. When the girl pretended to feel pain and she cried out a little, the eyes of the American would light up with happiness. Foam dribbled out of the sides of his mouth, and he groaned as if the real deed were on. When I dropped them outside the New Stanley Hotel, the American took out a 100-Shilling note and gave it to the girl, who walked away. The American tourist stayed behind, listing for me the virtues of the country as if I was the owner of Kenya: "Kenya is a great country... and afterwards, fantastic women, so beautiful. Even I, an old man, I can get a chick... I will come back with even more tourists so that they can see Kenya's wild game and women for themselves ..." (*Devil on the Cross*, p.70)

All things considered, the Kenyan novelist can help express his indignant outcry against the way, in the post-independence African countries, vulnerable youths, and particularly young girls like Warĩĩnga are objectified and disillusioned in their very homeland both by tourists and their own countrymen.

2-Maina and Meja: The resignation of a lost generation

Young girls are not the only ones to be devastated and disillusioned as they are fleeing modern Kenya. Maina and Meja, the protagonists of *Kill Me Quick*, are also archetypes of disillusioned heroes. They better epitomize the desperate situation of those African in general and Kenyan youths in particular who, willing to claim for better living conditions as a fair and equitable part of the national cake, that independence they all fought and shed blood for, would have to discover a gruesome world where the only surviving law is ruse and crime. In effect, in creating these two characters, the Kenyan novelist exposes the plight of the masses and workers in the present day political leaders set up in Africa. Interviewed by Lindfors Bernth (1979:70) on the social centrality of *Kill Me Quick*, Meja Mwangi confesses:

> In the early 1970's a number of my friends had just finished secondary school and couldn't find jobs. I felt it was important to tell their story, to show their plight in the city.[…] To write about the hopes and aspirations of the one who comes out of school and discovers desperation in the city. I felt that the problem of these people ought

to be brought to the attention of the rest of the society.

Meja's commitment about the plight young Kenyans illustrates not only how the Kenyan government, but all post-colonial African rulers do not work for the welfare of their citizens. We notice that the most victims at all social levels are the youths. For, they are unable to find job just after their studies. A committed position that Meja hailed as the most significant and exciting figure to emerge in the East African literary scene because of his Jomo Kenyatta Literature award in 1974 for Kill Me Quick endorses devotedly for as he told Bernth (1979:70): "*Nobody, no young boy growing up in Kenya at the time (neocolonial period) could avoid awareness of what was happening*."

Indeed, this second (but first published) novel with which the Kenyan writer came into literary prominence, introduces us with two high school graduates who move to the city, hoping that their high school certificates will help them find good paying jobs and enjoy a better life as Maina explained: "I had big dreams […] I would get a job, earn a lot of money, wear a suit, buy a car, a house, a wife and be a man." (*Kill Me Quick*, p.2)

However, they are disillusioned with the city for the reality on the ground which is totally different since it does not help them easily achieve their dreams and aspirations. For, once in the city jobs are nowhere to be found as Meja for example is disenchanted with job opportunities when he claims: "*where are the jobs they said we'd find in the city, they never existed said Maina*." (p.4) Rather, the city proves to be very a hostile place in comparison to the friendly atmosphere that prevails in the village, the two newcomers realize that the city is characterized by individualism and indifference as the narrator explains:

> Meja had been in the city three days and was yet to find something that did not worry him. The busy, indifferent people, the endless traffic and the high buildings filled him with more awe than wonder. It appeared he had landed in a strange and hostile place where everyone was a foe, every vehicle a charging beast and every building a dark cave. How would he survive, let alone make it here? (*Kill Me Quick*, pp.4-5).

Certainly, through the question "how would he survive, let alone make it here?", the author helps us figure out how unfavourable place the city is for the youths from the countryside to make a living there. Having no home, Meja and Maina choose to leave in backstreets and try to survive by eating rotten food from dumpsters. They have no alternative in a post-independence city where social injustices constitute the driving dynamic. They are, like other employed youths, nothing but 'pariahs' doomed to violence. This is what Maina explains and helps Meja accept this irony of life in the following passage:

> He broke something in two and offered half of it to Meja. It smelled so awful Meja could not eat it.
> "It takes getting used to", Maina said. "Try an orange."
>
> The smell aside, the orange was not impossible. Meja managed some of it by holding his breath whenever he took a bite.
>
> "You will get used to it ", Maina assured. "Everyone does. Our job-seeking gang broke up when our money ran out. Then desperation and hunger scattered? Some headed to Main Street to seek their fortune in the pockets of the employed. They became pickpockets, muggers, bag-snatchers and bank robbers. Most of them are in prison or dead. I chose the backstreets.
>
> […] "There are two ways of survival," Maina said to him. "There is the fast and slow way, the hard or easy, the main street or the backstreet. But then there is always the way back home and plough." […] "I can't help you with that," Maina said to him. "I told you everything you need to know. You decide." (*Kill me Quick*, pp.3,5)

As the story unfolds, one learns that Maina and Meja are fortunately, rescued by an old man called BOI who works for a rich farmer named BIG MAN. Having accepted BOI's help, they are offered a house, food and a small wage while working in BIG's farm. However, their happiness will not last long for they will be subjected to hard work before being driven out of the farm

for they are suspected to have broken into BIG MAN's bedroom and stolen his things. Consequently, they go back to the backstreets, but they are soon separated while being chased by the police. Maina befriends Razor who is the head of a criminal gang in shanty town. He engages himself in a series of criminal actions, from a robber to impersonating a milkman. His friend Meja who has tried to work in a quarry also becomes a robber. As a result, they meet again in prison. A very despairing episode for, in their cell room, the two heroes and other cellmates are totally disillusioned by the course of events. The author renders the prisoners' enraged outcry in the following passage:

> "Life outside is hard, Affande," Meja said? "I have not eaten for two weeks. They don't waste food on remand prisoners anymore. I had to plead guilty or starve to death in police cells."[…]They always returned full of anger and excuses and blaming society, destiny, upbringing, tribalism and everyone but themselves.
> "What can I do?" they cried. "I can't get a job, the government is corrupt, society is mean, like herd and God does not care. What else can I do, Affande?"
> Some of them cried real tears when they arrived back.
> "I am only a man?" they said. "If God wanted me to change he would make me?" (*Kill Me Quick*, pp. 139, 141)

This quotation full of desperate questions, epitomize the hopeless mindset of youths who have no alternative but returning to prison for they begin to doubt about everything including their own life that they think is no more worth the living. Then, sentences such as "Life outside is hard, Affande" or "I had to plead guilty or starve to death in police cells" tell more about Meja's inclination for life in prison. He has his mind made up to endure all forms humiliations and regulations just for sake of finding there something to eat.

After some years of imprisonment, they are released. Then, shortly after their release, Maina is shot dead for a homicide, while his friend who is imprisoned again, waits for a trial.

Scrutinizing the plight of the protagonists Meja, Maina and their friends who are archetypes of many young people in Kenya in particular and in Africa in general, Eustace Palmer (1979: 307-308), writes:

> The experiences of Maina and Meja are thus a paradigm, not just of the Kenyan situation, but of that in the whole of Africa where hordes of youths educated up to school certificate standard discover that in spite of their qualifications the economic and social situation ensures they have to roam the streets unemployed for years. The consequence is not just tremendous waste of potential, but a loss of faith in the value of education.

It should also be stressed that since it is very difficult and hard to cope with life in these more and capitalist post-independence cities, young people's pessimism and resignation are then manifest in the studied narratives through the fact that some of them try or commit suicide. It is the case of Maina who, at the end of the novel becomes totally pessimistic to the point that he succumbs to the temptation to hang himself as the narrator pathetically describes the scene:

> Maina walked away his heart weighed down by his loss. He did not look up until he was back in Shanty Town, inside the house he shared with the gang. They were all out and he had no one to talk to. He lay on the common bed and hoped to die. He lay for a long time, looking up the roof thinking how his life had turned out all wrong and pointless. Looking up at the roof beams he decided it was all too much to go on. His friends found him dangling from the highest point of the roof with a rope round his neck. (*Kill Me Quick*, p. 131)

Sentences such as "Maina walked away his heart weighed down by his loss", "He lay on the common bed and hoped to die", and "Looking up at the roof beams he decided it was all too much to go on" tell more about the young man's incapacity to escape his despairing fate. The point the author is making here is that failure is like the chorus cry that sounds like a requiem among most young African people who have no more hope for their future.

The rationale behind such psychological collapse is too obvious and revealed as the story unfolds. Indeed, a thorough exploration of the novel shows that at a certain moment, among all the bitter recollections coming up in Maina's mind, two of them particularly haunt him the most. The first is that after his release from the prison, Maina is embittered by the loss of Delilah, her girlfriend he relied too much on for "*determined to marry her and start a different life*." (p. 129) He learns at his cost that Delilah, though with a baby, got married to a good and rich man. What is very depressed is the fact that when he returns to the village, Maina is disillusioned to discover that his father's house, this very home place, has been sold by auction by a bank. The following passage pathetically describes Maina's homecoming:

> Maina walked back the way he had come, following a path more felt than seen, and came across a fence that he did not remember. A dog barked from the other side. Maina banged on the gate. The dog ran to the gate and barked until someone called out from the house,
> "Who is there?"
>
> "Maina," he said. "Your son Maina."
>
> "Wait there."
> […] The young man led him to the house then disappeared round the back. There was another man at the door of the house. It was not his father's face or the face of anyone he remembered.
> "Who are you ?" he asked.
>
> "Who are you ?" asked the man.
>
> "I am Maina," he said.
>
> "What do you want?"
>
> "I am looking for my father," he said. "Kamau Chief, I am his son."
>
> "His son?" The man was suspicious.
>
> "Is this not his house ?" Maina asked him.
>
> "This is my house," said the man. "Kamau Chief does not live here anymore."
>
> "Where does he live?"
>
> "I do not know," said the man. "I bought this place from the bank in an auction." (*Kill Me Quick*, p.135)

This conversational exchange between the two characters is very informative of Maina's family situation. Through Maina's, words "I am looking for my father, Kamau Chief, I am his son" and his questions "Is this not his house?, where does he live?" and his interlocutor's answers such as "This is my house", "Kamau Chief does not live here anymore" and "I bought this place from the bank in an auction", the author helps the reader figure out how Maina is really a disillusioned hero. As the conversation goes on, Maina's gets very embittered to realize that his brother and himself are, in one way or another, responsible for all the calamities that befell their family. A very revealing narration that I dare quote it at a certain length:

> Maina's mind went numb, as the man went on to explain that he had lived there two years.
> "I heard stories," he said.
>
> "What sort of stories?"
> Kamau Chief was a good man and by all. That was why they called him Chief. Because he was a good and reliable man worthy of leadership. But Kamau had fallen on hard times after taking a cooperative loan to send his first son to the city to find a job. The son never came back to pay the loan as expected. […] Maina dug his fingers into the wood doorframe to support himself. During the last drought, Kamau Chief sent his other son to the city to look for the first one and he too did not come back. It seems that the city is a poisoned honey pot of honey, a bottomless pit from which no young man ever returns. Maina hardly heard him; so hard and fast was his heard

> now spinning.
>
> "It is cold out here," the man said. "Come inside." […] Maina backed off. He could not enter that house now, not the house in which he was born and grew up and that now belonged to a stranger. The house in which he had left his parents to languish in poverty waiting for him to come back and rescue them. Never again. He walked back the way he had come. (*Kill Me Quick*, pp.135-136)

A very pathetic story of a once stable family but which is in turmoil because of life vicissitudes. What strikes the most the reader's attention is the way the 'sacrificial' love of Kamau Chief, that "a good and reliable man worthy of leadership", to secure his children's welfare it not paid back as expected. A reality that Maina hardly realizes and accepts as the narrator keeps on describing the hero falls in confusion and despair:

> Maina staggered down a path confusion and desperate. Then he started sobbing loudly. Blinded by the tears and the rain, he tripped and fell, and lay there on the mud soaking wet. He was down for a long time, unable to rise or accept the truth; the truth that, because him, his family was gone, scattered by poverty and despair. It is because him that they no longer had a home. It was all his doing and wished to die from pain. (*Kill Me Quick*, p.136)

From the forgoing, one easily infers how depressed Maina is. This psychological collapse is evidenced in the above quotation through phrases such as "staggered down path confusion and desperate", "Blinded by the tears and the rain." But the last straw which consecrates Maina's downfall is to be found in sentences such as "he tripped and fell, and lay there on the mud soaking wet." Such disillusionment is very often the cause of many acts of vandalism in many African societies where the rate of unemployment is critically high.

3- Criminality as a chorus cry for change

Facing an 'existential' dilemma, violence and crimes are therefore the only means used by the youth to meet their daily needs. In fact, these young men resort to violence and crimes because they cannot work. Hence, pessimism, resignation and resort to violent crimes can be interpreted as a perfect indication of post-colonial youth despair. This criminality is therefore viewed by most of young characters in the novels under consideration as a reverberating cry for social redress. For, these young people think that their violent actions are the only way to attract their authorities' attention about their critical conditions in their very homeland.

Far from making an apology of violence, some authors analyze the young men's resort to criminality as simply the symptoms or the expression of disenchantment with socio economic and political realities in the city. In this regard, Tom Odhiambo (2007: 136) writes:

> as a result of the inability of the system to sustain a coherent mechanism for fair and equitable division of the national resources, different individuals or interest groups that have been pushed onto the margins of the formal system of resources distribution resort to strategies outside officially sanctioned means of accessing economic resources or livelihood to make a living.

Odhiambo still sees the adoption of antisocial behaviours by the protagonists and their friends in *Kill Me Quick*, for instance, as a rebellion against the political authority as he sates: "*consequently, the government authority and the force of the law and the authority of institutions that safeguard it are challenged in an environment which increasingly becomes criminalized*."(Ibid., p.136) According to him, the distortion of the youth is a protest to the leaders who marginalize and do not allow them to have a fair and equitable part of the national cake. Odhiambo then pleads for these desperate youth who have no ways out but driven into crimes only to get food, drink when he continues to argue: "in most instances this group is made up only of what is socially and in the grammar of the judicial system known as "*petty thieves*'' and "*pickpockets*''.(Ibid.,

p.140) Hence, one can understand that if these young men were employed they would not probably be what they are, as Ayobami Kehinde (2004:134) writes:

> One cannot excuse Maina, Meja and their cohorts' sudden slide into crimes, but the real issue is to see beyond their acts (which are only symptoms) and identify circumstances that could have turned once normal and innocent young into recidivists.

A cross-examination of the novel obviously shows that the youth gets involved into violent crimes because of unemployment. We for example discover that Maina and Meja have tried to avoid criminality, but because of unemployment, they have no alternative but to get involved into it. This is for instance, a practice used by the members of Razor's gang to get food and drink in *Kill Me Quick*. The novel provides a striking evidence in a sequence where Maina, the new member, Kifagio and professor who are walking and running after a man just in order to snatch his wallet of money, as enlightened by this dialogue:

> What is the matter with you, Kifagio asked him -He walks fast, Maina said.
> Run after him, professor advised.
> You are allowed to hit him, added Kifagio.
> Do not do that Professor said quickly, do not get killed. (*Kill Me Quick*, p.62)

This conversation obviously shows that the target person is subject to all forms of violence as the only way to urge him to give away his property. The phenomenon is still present not only in Kenyan, but is even widespread in most African cities where poverty and unemployment are still rampant and hit worldly records. Is the case of the sadly famous youth gangs such as 'microbes' in Ivory Coast (West Africa), 'black babies' or 'Kulunas' in the two Congo's (Central Africa)….. .

Furthermore, apart from the Razor's gang, one meets many other characters such as Meja and his cellmates who are finally arrested after perpetrating violent crimes such as hijacking cars, breaking and robbing banks, breaking houses, mugging for many years.

At this level of analysis, it would not be impossible to 'diagnose' some symptoms of mental disorder in the youths because of the psychological suffering they endure. Their victims are horribly traumatized if not simply almost killed in cold blood. In *Kill Me Quick*, Maina's murder of the new occupant of his father's house helps buttress this point:

> Now delirious and disoriented, he stumbled to the house and knocked on the door. […] "Open up?," Maina hammered on the door. […] Maina saw the door begin to close his last hope disappear. He threw himself at the closing door. The man gave a startled shout and fell backward inside the house. He scrambled to his feet and lunged for a panga he had leaning by the door. Maina charged in after him and grappled for the panga. They fought for the possession of the panga, breaking things and upsetting furniture. (*Kill Me Quick*, pp.137-138)

As it can be seen, sentences such as "He threw himself at the closing door" and "He scrambled to his feet and lunged for a panga he had leaning by the door. Maina charged in after him and grappled for the panga", obviously indicate that before killing the unfortunate man, Maina who becomes overwhelmed with problems and almost bewildered, shows signs of mental disorder. The description made by his friend about his hot temper is very illustrative:

> I read about it in the news. It said they found him wondering miles away from the place, confused and covered in mud and blood [...] the police could get a word out of him. They said he was mad. That is what the newspapers said. (*Kill Me Quick*, p. 146)

Similarly, lady Warĩĩnga in *Devil on the Cross* shows signs of psychological disorder considering the way she overturns and

'crucifies' the devil and all his acolytes. Indeed, as the story ends, Warĩĩnga, as 'serial killer' takes revenge over the 'snatchers of other people's lives', and chooses to shoot dead the Old Rich man from Ngorika, Gitahi, and his honorable guests rather than enjoying love, first with the Old Man from Ngorika, as the latter proposes her, and secondly with Gatuĩria, the Old Man's son and Warĩĩnga's new beloved:

> You snatcher of other people's lives! Do you remember the game you and I used to play, the game of the hunter and the hunted? Did you imagine that a day might come when the hunted would become the hunter? What's done cannot be undone, I'm not going to save you. But I shall save many other people, whose lives will not be ruined by words of honey and perfume.
>
> […] The Rich Old Man interrupted Warĩĩnga: "I knew you would agree! My darling, whom I love dearly! My little fruit, my little orange, my flower to brighten my old age!" He went on, carried away his words. He did not see Warĩĩnga open her handbag. He did not see Warĩĩnga take out the pistol.
>
> "Look at me!" Warĩĩnga commanded, with the voice of judge. When, Gatuĩria's father saw the gun, his words suddenly ceased. The people outside heard the shots. When they entered the room, they found Gatuĩria's father kneeling, still clinging to Warĩĩnga by her knees. But three bullets were lodged in his body. (*Devil on the Cross*, p.253)

From the forgoing, one realizes that nothing could prevent Warĩĩnga take her revenge. Even the Rich Old Man's sweet tongues such as "I knew you would agree! My darling, whom I love dearly! My little fruit, my little orange, my flower to brighten my old age!" could not exert any possible influence so as to cool Warĩĩnga's hot temper. Thus, the sentence "What's done cannot be undone, I'm not going to save you" obviously evidences Warĩĩnga's 'Manicheistic' attitude for, in her excessive anger, she feels no sentiment after committing this homicide. This evidently, shows that the young lady's heroic action is a result of her revolt against male's exploitation. Warĩĩnga is calm and triumphant. She is happy and believed to have accomplished the Heaven's will. The death of such a sucker is not a tragedy, it should even be celebrated. That is why, Warĩĩnga does not feel pity for Gatuĩria who has lost his father. Thus, when Gatuĩria needs some explanations about the course of events, instead, Warĩĩnga shows a defiant attitude:

> "What is it? What is it, Warĩĩnga?" Gatuĩria asked, "There kneels a jigger, a louse, a weevil, a flea, a bedbug!" He mistletoe, a parasite that lives on the trees of other people's lives!"(*Devil on the Cross*, p.254)

As this homicide has not totally soothed her anger, Warĩĩnga rather feels her retaliation bolstered for, like an 'enraged' dog, she will soon find new victims and shoot other friends of Gatuĩria's father who are outside as the narrator better puts it:

> Warĩĩnga left the room. People gave way before her. Outside the door she met Kĩhaahu Wa Gatheeca and Gitutũ Wa Gataanguru. And suddenly, remembering Wangari and Mũturi and the student leader-the people who had roused her from mental slavery-she felt an anger she had not felt as she killed Gitahy. "You too, and you!" And she shot at both Kĩhaahu and Gitutũ, splintering their kneecaps. (*Devil on the Cross*, p.254)

Here, sentences such as "she felt an anger she had not felt as she killed Gitahy" and "she shot at both Kĩhaahu and Gitutũ, splintering their kneecaps" evidence Warĩĩnga's overwhelming bitterness. For, did she need to splinter her victims' kneecaps again as if the simple fact of shooting at them was not enough to calm her down?

All things considered, the exploration *Kill Me Quick* and *Devil on the Cross* evidences that the youths are still targets of the ruling class and, subjects to all forms of violence in cities where they moved, expecting for better living conditions. Dashed hope! For, these post-independence cities prove a fertile ground for all for ruse and crime.

2. CONCLUSION

This study comes up with the conclusion that Meja Mwangi and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o are authors who are very committed to creating literature that helps in rectifying whichever mistakes there may be in the African society they write for. They are masters of capturing the psychological tension, the cultural degradation, the violence, and immorality of colonialism and neo-colonialism in their novels. In a more progressive sense, these two Kenyan novelists depict a struggle to change the nature of social institutions, modes of thought, and cultural practices that impede human and societal growth. Any reader conversant with *Kill Me Quick* and *Devil on the Cross* cannot miss to observe their authors' enduring propensity for the youths' welfare in the context of post-independence African novel. The analysis has shown that with the advent of the independence, the protagonists of these two novels: Meja, Maina, and Warĩĩnga pictured as the microcosm of all the mass of African rural youths who, confident in their diplomas and get attracted by the nascent urban areas, are disillusioned with the city that they hoped to be a place where they could easily achieve their dreams and aspirations. For, under the strain of the unfilled expectations, these three protagonists finally break. Consequently, they turn to serious alcohol drinking and drug in order to forget their problems. Some others, who remain unemployed, turn into criminals. As for women, they resort to prostitution to make their living. Really, these cities, beyond their attractiveness, paradoxically prove destructive for many of them as the narrator of *Kill Me Quick* says: "*It seems that the city is a poisoned honey pot of honey, a bottomless pit from which no young man ever returns*." (p. 136).

From the forgoing, one easily infers that Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's vision when he states (1981:188): "*I have written about and believed in a Kenya for Kenyans, (…) I have attempted to hold up a mirror through which Kenyans can look at themselves in their past, their present and perhaps in their future*" can be applied both to *Kill Me Quick* and *Devil on the Cross*. In this regard, the word 'mirror' is metaphorical, for it alludes to these novels within which Meja and Ngũgĩ paint the harmful past of the African continent which was sarcastically invaded and dramatically shared or divided as a cake. *Kill Me Quick* and *Devil on the Cross* really stand as mirrors in the sense that they let the reader discover the youth despair. They describe, in one way or another, the consequences not only of the exposure to the West bringing with it a new culture and a new vision of the world, but also of the incompetence of the post-independence leaders to meet the youths' growing expectations.

As a final assessment, the protagonists of the two novels considered in this study are archetypes of 'disillusioned heroes' in the post-independence African countries whose lifeline has been paved with trials. Craving for social well-being, they unfortunately realize that everything good is still to come simply because the ruling elite meant to care about the satisfaction of youth's crucial needs, rather, concentrate on making a lot of money and getting public attention.

The Kenyan novelists, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o and Meja Mwangi, with their explicit desire to overturn and end this chaotic situation, have consistently positioned themselves as advocates for the ordinary downtrodden in Kenya and, more generally, in Africa.

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