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The Nairobi Castaways: Novelistic Representations of Slum Dwellers

Wafula Yenjela

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Introduction

- 1 Meja Mwangi's (1976, 202) *Going Down River Road* provides a profound gaze into slum demolitions in Nairobi:

"The whole of Nairobi Valley is awake in chaos. Up and down the stinking murky river fire, huge tongues of red hot fire, lick up contraptions of paper and wood and extend impotent black smoke to the dark heavens above. Shanty dwellers mill around saving whatever is possible. No one cries, not even babies. [...] The game is survival. [...] Their part demands they keep calm, tolerant, and when the public health army is gone, rebuild with the same quiet patience and determination."

- 2 Here, we encounter a disenfranchised people living in grotesque dwellings in a space that has been transmuted into a battleground where the city's 'army' wages a vicious war against them. Resilience is the slum dwellers' only means to counterattack and assert their belonging in the city.
- 3 The excerpt above stages Kenya's urban histories of the 1970s. It enables salient insights on castaways' precarity in the city and, more importantly, on how novelists link the conditions with neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, the term castaways as used here epitomizes Judy Butler's (2009, 2) notion of precarity—those populations stripped of recognizability, who are differentially exposed to "heightened risk of disease, poverty,

starvation, displacement [and] violence without protection.” Even though Butler particularly addresses precarity in relation to gender performativity, her views profoundly speak to the plight of Nairobi’s slum dwellers whose citizenships remain in limbo. Butler (2009, 4) asserts, for instance, that in a nation-state, recognizability is differentially allocated based on certain norms, whereby “non-compliance calls into question the viability of one’s life, the ontological conditions of one’s persistence.” In Africa, colonialism occasioned a situation where race and ethnicity determined one’s citizenship. Presenting pertinent examples from apartheid South Africa and Nigeria after the Civil War, Mahmood Mamdani (2018, xii) shows that ethnic homelands and ethnic states, respectively, determined people’s citizenship: “those who resided outside the boundaries of their ethnic homelands risked being disenfranchised.” Similarly, the Nairobi castaways, both in colonial and independent Kenya, outside their ethnic ‘reserves’ remain a disenfranchised lot, vagrants.

- 4 Slums, as defined by the World Bank (2002, 1), are “neglected parts of cities where housing and living conditions are appallingly poor” and “range from high density, squalid central city tenements to spontaneous squatter settlements without legal recognition or rights, sprawling at the edge of cities.” The selected novelists vividly portray slum dwellers’ stark living conditions as well as their struggles to belong in a city indifferent to them. The portrayed war against slums reveal the extent to which neoliberal capitalism influenced the Kenyan government to prioritise ‘development’ against a ballooning, impoverished, urban populace. Such development façades are illuminated in Rasna Warah’s (2008, 7) argument that development in most African countries is a myth—it “favours the rich”, is oppressive, and “the worldview, intentions and mindset of development practitioners are paternalistic, arrogant and totally ignorant of the reality of poor people’s lives.”
- 5 The novels studied in this article are Mwangi Gicheru’s *Across the Bridge* (1979), Charles Mangua’s *Son of Woman* (1971), Meja Mwangi’s *Going Down River Road* (1976) and *The Cockroach Dance* (1979). These novels explore the everyday challenges and pleasures of the Nairobi castaways of the 1970s. Due to the thematic depth on slum conditions, I focus more extensively on Mwangi’s novels than on Mangua’s and Gicheru’s. Nevertheless, the selection of the novels is anchored on the spatio-temporal setting, noting that the slum reform debate was popularised in the 1970s by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). It was also in the 1970s that international neoliberal capitalist models consolidated their roots in Kenya.
- 6 As mentioned above, the onslaught against slum dwellers and their informal economy in 1970s Kenya was disturbing not only to literary artists but to international organizations as well. For instance, it occasioned the 1972 ILO Mission to Kenya which “developed and popularised the notion of the ‘informal sector’ in explaining how cities grow and function [and emphasised the fact that] the informal sector is not a parasite on [developing] economies [...], but an integral part of them” (Winpenny 1979, 119). ILO proposed the elimination of “official licensing of trade and commercial activity [...] except where they were strictly required for health and amenity” (120). But these proposals appear to have been shelved or ignored completely since, as this article will demonstrate, it was in the 1970s that slum dwellers and slum economies experienced investors’ and state authorities’ fiercest wrath.
- 7 Despite the Nairobi castaways’ determination to live in and transform the city to their advantage, neoliberal capital’s stranglehold of 1970s Kenya significantly contributed to

their wretchedness. According to David Harley (2005, 6), a neoliberal state “facilitate[s] conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital”; the “freedoms it embodies reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital.” Indeed, as Colin Leys (1974, 26) writes, neoliberal capital is compounded by the “formation of classes, or strata, within a colony, which are closely allied to and dependent on foreign capital, and which form the basis of support for the regime which succeeds the colonial administration.”

- 8 Expounding on Kwame Nkrumah’s idea of neo-colonialism, Leys (1974, 27) argues that neo-colonialism is “a stage which is inherently likely to give way to other forms of imperialism” since it “re-produces and further extends underdevelopment, giving rise to new forms of class struggle which ‘an indirect and subtle form of domination’ may prove inadequate to contain, giving way to more direct and crude forms”. Tim Murithi (2009, 2) best illustrates the direct crude exploitation embedded in aid to Africa by European institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

Theory and Methodology

- 9 Various literary works, some of which I study here, aptly catalogue the historical unfolding of neoliberal capitalism in Kenya. In teasing out the selected novels’ reconfigurations of cities, I employ New Historicism literary theory which locates literary works in their ideological and historical contexts. According to William Palmer (1997, 7), the “New Historicist project [is] revisionist; simultaneously widening and deepening and archeologically discovering new dimensions of the accepted master texts.” Literary works provide indispensable insights on extant metanarratives regarding the city—a canvas onto which novels reconfigure the nation’s histories that feature through various characters who impress their hopes, aspirations and desires upon it.
- 10 The methods used here include close textual reading, archival research, and fieldwork. Barry Brummett (2010, 3) defines close reading as “*the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings*” (original emphases). Close reading goes hand in hand with archival methods where knowledge production is achieved through a study of historical documents. Fieldwork was also employed to enable the researcher to learn from the environment through observation and informal conversations with selected slum dwellers. The purpose of the fieldwork was to assess actual living conditions, note transformations over time and interlink findings with what is underscored in the selected novels of the 1970s and other historical documents.
- 11 The fieldwork conducted between 10 May and 25 May 2022 focused on the lived experiences of dwellers of Mukuru Kayaba, Mukuru Kwa Njenga, Kibera, Mathare and Kawangware. The slums were sampled based on the prevalence of slum demolitions, high levels of insecurity, and extreme levels of poverty evident in poor infrastructure, social amenities, and dilapidated quality of housing. During the fieldwork, I engaged in informal conversations with ten opinion leaders from each slum regarding their lived experiences and slum demolitions. The findings transude through my analyses in the body of the article.

A Brief History of Slum Dwellers in Nairobi

- 12 A brief history of Nairobi is necessary here as it illuminates why the city became repellent to its impoverished masses. Nairobi was founded as an administrative centre for the development of the European settler economy in the early 20th century. This centre gradually transformed the space from a Maasai people's pastureland into a white people's domain. As a way of articulating colonial power through the built environment, the settlers chose to fortress the city with racist ordinances which would permanently etch themselves in Nairobi's soul. In a study that outlines the histories of "vagrant people" in Nairobi, Paul Ococock (2006, 41) observes that "the colonial government developed a series of regulations—of which vagrancy was one of the first—to retain and manipulate the movement of Africans." According to Kinuthia Macharia (1992, 226), "the implementation of the Vagrancy Act of 1922 (the first had been enacted in 1902) meant not only that 'unauthorised' huts could be demolished, but also that any African found in Nairobi without a job was liable to be identified as a potential criminal, who ought to be repatriated to the so-called 'native reserves.'" 'Authorised' Africans in Nairobi during colonial times were those useful to the colonial economy—"employed on the railways, or in the government sector, or in the homes of the colonial masters" (Macharia 1992, 226).
- 13 At the same time, the expulsion of Africans from the city sprouted from the phobia that urbanised Africans would disrupt both colonial and urban order. Ococock (2006, 45) elucidates: "The urban environment appeared, to many colonial officials, to erode the social and political fabric of African society, and this in turn had grave consequences for the maintenance of colonial social order." In 1932, over 1000 "vagrants" were arrested, detained, put to forced labour to earn money for their repatriation to rural areas (Ococock 2006, 48). The numbers of people who faced this fate increased with time, reaching the peak during Kenya colony's State of Emergency declared in October 1952. As will be demonstrated in this article, the propensity to expel/deport urban outcasts from the city to rural areas designated as ancestral homelands appears to have its genesis in the colonial policies outlined here.
- 14 Historically, Nairobi has been the locus of struggle for socio-political and economic transformation in Kenya. This is attested by the Harry Thuku strike in 1922 when city dwellers united by shared deplorable labour and colonial conditions emerged as a group that had developed a strong national conscience (Zezeza 1993, 6). To the protesters, the city became a mobilizing zone for socio-political transformation; it enabled visibility of an oppressed people's vision of freedom and social justice. Considering the fact that many protesters were killed by colonial forces, the city also made colonial brutality visible. However, the most significant struggles in the city are not necessarily the spectacular, but those concerning everyday challenges. Frederick Cooper (1983, 10) argues that the struggles for urban space are "not so much the dramatic confrontations of strikes, riots, and revolt, but the daily struggles over the details of life in the workplace, the marketplace, and the residence," issues which lead to the "transformation of ideology and culture, the forging of vast spatial systems in which people carried out their efforts at survival, advancement and struggle". It is in this respect that the present article underscores portrayed intimate everyday struggles of the Nairobi castaways as a way of exposing the effects of neoliberal capital.

- 15 The choice to reflect on such histories through literary works is anchored in the understanding that “[t]here is a long tradition of work on the symbiotic relations between literature and the cities [whereby cities are] a major locus of literary creativity and literature in turn [functions] to make the process of modernity legible” (Odhiambo 2005, 47). The cityscapes, enormous obstacles and humble aspirations of the Nairobi castaways transfigure into cultural cauldrons that manifest through rich creative enterprises such as ghetto music, spoken word, visual art, ghetto film productions, and theatre. Indeed, as Chris Dunton (2008, 68) remarks in reference to Lagos, novelists portray the city “not only as a site of disorder and decay but as an environment in which creative energies are nurtured that are held to constitute corrective and liberatory force.”
- 16 Roger Kurtz (1998, 75) outlines how Kenyan urban novelists “began to draw from the city a whole new set of symbols, as cars and buildings, Western clothing, commercialism and commodification became the new signifiers of the ambivalent glamour of the city.” Further, the “new Kenyan political and economic elite, with its power consolidated in the city, provided a whole new set of characters to explore” (*ibid*). But the shift in representation had shelved ‘obsessions’ for lush expanses of agricultural land formerly worked by white settlers—a thematic issue extensively explored in Kenya’s earlier anti-colonial novels such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Weep Not, Child* (1976), and Meja Mwangi’s *Carcase for Hounds* (1974). Instead, they focalised urban outcasts’ navigation of precarious cityscapes, thus suggesting that the battleground for freedom had shifted from farmlands to the urban space where the city had produced a new crop of the oppressed. Like the Mau Mau freedom fighters portrayed in the works mentioned, the urban outcasts had to be daring and rebellious to navigate the city’s harsh contours.
- 17 I reckon that Nairobi’s notoriety in urbanization problems is appreciated the world over, to the extent that Sarah Smiley (2009, 219) posits that “Nairobi is a poster child for urban problems.” Mostly, the urbanization problems result from rapid industrialization which is designed to exclude urban outcasts. Tom Odhiambo (2005, 47) observes: “Because of its advanced levels of industrialization, commercial activities, political signification, social and cultural diversity and perceived sophistication, the image of Nairobi has become a signifier of modernity in works of art and literature.” But an inquiry into the ownership of the industries and the commerce which Odhiambo refers to, especially during the first three decades of post-independence Kenya, reveals a complex web of imperialism (see Leys 1974, 118).
- 18 My reading of the selected novels reveals the novelists’ exposure of the underlying exploitations of marginalised urbanites by both local and foreign neoliberal capitalists. The article revisits the misconception that urban castaways have ancestral homelands in rural areas they can return to when forced out of the city; the prevalence of slum demolitions in the 1970s; the illusion of decent housing closer to the city business district which, unfortunately, prove to be overcrowded, sickeningly squalid tenements.

Trapped in the City, Alienated in the Rural Areas

- 19 On 11 September 1964, President Jomo Kenyatta romanticised land and rural life as he encouraged urbanites to return to their rural ancestral land.¹ Even without relying on any land ownership census, the president’s assumption was that most urban outcast

had abandoned certain tracts of land in pursuit of employment opportunities and the glamour of the city. This position does not only echo the colonial phobia of the urbanised African, but is also flawed since landlessness in the rural areas is one of the causes of rural-urban migration in Kenya. Kinuthia Macharia (2003, 18–19) outlines multifarious causes of migration in 1970s Kenya: social factors such as failed/hostile marriages and banishment; political factors such as ethnic hostilities; ecological factors such as drought; economic factors such as the quest for employment in industrialized cities. Some of these factors were still relevant in 2022. More than fifty percent of the slum dwellers I engaged in informal conversations with during my fieldwork mentioned that they owned no land in their supposed ancestral rural homelands. Landlessness, caused either by their being descendants of the proletariat, by political displacement, land-grabbing, auctioning, or selling to settle crucial bills (medical or school fees) had contributed to their settlement in the slums of Nairobi.

20 Mwangi Gicheru's romance novel *Across the Bridge* (1979) demonstrates that Nairobi's castaways had little or no land to return to. Chuma, the novel's protagonist who works as a houseboy in the city's affluent suburbs becomes acutely conscious of the social barriers between the rich and the poor. His boss, Kahuthu, understands the extent of land deprivation of ordinary Kenyans especially in the early decades of Kenya's independence when socio-political elites scrambled to purchase lands vacated by European settlers. In the novel, Chuma is attempting to escape the consequences of impregnating Caroline, Kahuthu's beloved daughter. He tenders his verbal resignation claiming he wished to redirect his energies to farming. But Kahuthu sneers at the very idea of farming which Chuma reads as follows: "He was wondering how a cheap creature like me could own a farm which produced more than the salary of a houseboy. People of my class were not supposed to own farms" (Gicheru 1979, 17).

21 The protagonist's observations are interwoven with sarcasm to underscore the miseries of the marginalised. Chuma's return to his rural home exhibits the very scarcity of land implied in Kahuthu's sneer:

"It was now a week since I had left Kahuthu's place and settled on the half hectare of land which was the only property for my parents, my three brothers, and me. All my brothers were married, with at least three kids each. Two were labourers in a nearby sawmill, while the third one earned his living by tilling the exhausted plot."
(1979, 19)

22 In this view, one can conclude that the likes of Kahuthu live in Nairobi but own large tracts of land in the rural areas. Importantly, the novelist presents a critical observation on the precarity of Nairobi's castaways, a category trapped in poverty both in the city and the rural areas. Even though Gicheru demonstrates that for the Nairobi castaways, rich farmlands in rural areas are almost non-existent owing to the family size vis-à-vis land size, it can also be argued that Chuma has become alienated from land and rural life. Eventually, Chuma enlists in hard-core city crime in a desperate attempt to pursue his economic ascension, a symbolic, unorthodox struggle to address social inequalities.

23 *Across the Bridge* reveals the despair of the Nairobi castaways in a neoliberal capitalist milieu. This features conspicuously when Kisinga, a dangerous gangster and Chuma's fellow inmate, inducts other convicts into the world of crime through his life narrative:

"I was a cop, serving the public. Then that day came when they sacked me because I refused to favour an aggressive rich brute against a helpless innocent native.

[Thereafter], I refused to be tossed about in the name of good citizenship. I refused to be a vulture, scavenging on the remains of rich men's exploits." (1979, 60)

- 24 Kisinga's experience demonstrates that the state privileges the interests of private business barons over those of impoverished masses. Despite Kisinga's unreliability as a witness due to his egotistical nature and criminal record, his encounter unmasks a neoliberal state's determination to remove every obstacle along the pathways of private businesses. It would appear that Kisinga, in discharging his functions as a police officer, was nonconforming to the neoliberal capitalism framework, whence his summary dismissal. In a neoliberal state, the police, the military, and legal structures are tasked with facilitating operations of private businesses (see Harvey 2005, 2). In his analyses of Michel Foucault's theorisation of the police, Andrew Johnson (2014, 21) posits: "The modern neoliberal State tolerates and ignores the criminal transgressions of the rich and powerful, while over-policing the less-productive portions of the population."
- 25 The neoliberal state's marginalisation of ordinary people ushers in disillusionment over notions of good citizenship; it reduces the country into rich people's private property where the poor are merely trespassers. Such exclusionist acts underline the castaways' despair and recourse to crime in an attempt to right social inequalities. The narrator, Chuma, recites Kisinga's slogan which became engraved in prisoners' minds: "*It is easier for an elephant / To enter the hole of a mouse / Than for a poor coward / To enter the kingdom of money*" (1979, 66, original emphases). Moreover, when welcoming Chuma into his criminal gang, Kisinga asserts that they are not gangsters but "heroes of the 'give the poor man his due' movement" (p. 74).
- 26 Unlike Chuma who can claim some sort of ancestral home, Charles Mangua in *Son of a Woman* (1971) presents the absurd case of Dodge Kiunyu. Mangua complicates the question of ancestral lands for Nairobi castaways through portrayals of Nairobi castaways born in the slums, who know no other ancestral home. This category, as narrated in the novel, nurses aspirations to overcome tremendous social impediments and succeed through informal sector innovations, education, and engagement in politics that can transform slums. We encounter Dodge Kiunyu, the son of a prostitute, who declares: "I am the crank from downstairs who is not worth knowing"; "[n]ever had a dad in my blinking life"; "I ain't no brother to the son of man and I ain't no brother to nobody either" (1971, 7). When his mother dies in a tragic road accident, Dodge is left in the care of Miriam, another prostitute in the sprawling Eastleigh slum. Though accustomed to the poverty of Eastleigh and the challenges of living in a home which is also a brothel, Dodge is finally deported to the countryside when he is caught sexually experimenting with Tonia, Miriam's daughter. I will expound later on the idea of deportation from the city to the countryside and its implications regarding citizenship.
- 27 At present, I dwell on the misconception that Nairobi castaways have rich farmlands in the rural areas where they can return at will instead of eking out an existence in the slums. Mangua uses Dodge to flaunt Nairobi castaways' adeptness in navigating cityscapes for survival rather than the fabled ancestral rural farmlands. When Dodge is expelled from the city, he describes his journey to the countryside where he is supposed to trace his grandparents as banishment, shipping, and depositing: "Miriam managed to persuade [Kamau] to take me along and deposit me with my aged granny" (p. 33). Dodge imprints his trauma of being severed from the city through the imagery

of uprooting a tree: “I am the young tree which is uprooted to be transplanted a hundred miles away” (p. 35). He actually reckons: “I have never been out of Nairobi and not very much out of Eastleigh at that. For me it has always been shops and slums, streets and mud roads, evil smell and prostitutes and flies” (p. 36). In fact, on arriving at his supposed ancestral home, Dodge discovers that his maternal grandmother had “joined her ancestors a fortnight ago. She had died of old age” (p. 42). The death can be read as symbolising the futility of the much-vaunted ancestral lands. In Mangua’s sequel *Son of Woman in Mombasa* (1986), Dodge sarcastically reveals that ancestral land for Nairobi castaways is an illusion:

“Kaheti is the place where my mother was born so it is my legal home. [Grandmother] had this small plot of land of around four acres and since I am the only living descendant from her loins then this piece of land is mine by right. Maybe some punk is farming it illegally but that is no matter so long as he is willing to transport himself elsewhere when I show up.” (1986, 196)

- 28 Dodge saw the fabled plot of land only once, at the age of eleven. Since then, he has been in the city for more than two decades. Through Dodge, Mangua exhibits broken patrilineages and, consequently, broken ethnic nations courtesy of the city. Dodge features as the embodiment of outliers who become alienated from the land itself and the countryside spaces.

Housing Nightmare: Slum Demolitions and the Journey to Decent Housing

- 29 Unlike Mangua and Gicheru who concentrate on young men’s navigation of dangerous cityscapes for their economic advancement, Meja Mwangi underscores the vagaries and indignities of besieged slum dwellings. For instance, Meja Mwangi’s *Going Down River Road* portrays heartrending demolitions of informal settlements in Nairobi city. The novel foregrounds urban castaways’ existential struggles to belong in a city that is indifferent to them. Notably, belonging in the city is symbolic of a people’s quest for meaningful citizenship. But the right of movement and settlement anywhere in the colony was reserved for citizens—the white population. In colonial times, the ‘natives’ would require temporary resident permits in Nairobi. It is in this respect that the word deportation relating to Dodge Kiunyu discussed above makes sense. As I found out in my fieldwork, this propensity exists to this day among security agents who issue suspected criminals in slums ultimatums to return to their rural ancestral homes. Respondents pointed out that expulsion from the city usually precedes police extrajudicial killing of suspects in Nairobi slums. This suggests that the city remains a space of partial citizenship.
- 30 *Going Down River Road* engages with the slum demolitions of the 1970s during Jomo Kenyatta’s regime. Through the demolitions of the informal settlements, the Kenyatta regime was trying to perpetuate a particular “identity and self-esteem of a capital city” (Hake 1977, 111) acceptable to Europe, but at the expense of urban outcasts. The actions signified not only the regime’s myopia regarding the causes of slums but also its disinterest in the welfare of slum dwellers. By highlighting the suffering of Nairobi castaways in the thrall of the council authorities, the novelist envisions reforms. At the same time, the novelist demonstrates urban outcasts’ resilience to overcome complex territories of the inner city rife with poverty and crime

—spaces that are densely populated but on the periphery of the economic and political powers of a modern city (Simone 2004). The worsening poverty in the inner city is a situation which can be linked to the neoliberal stranglehold on Nairobi's commercial and industrial sectors. The adverse economic marginalisation of slum dwellers breeds crime, the narcotics enterprises, and seedy prostitution. We are offered glimpses into Nairobi's dark alleys such as River Road and Grogan Road; crowded drinking dens such as Karara Centre and the Eden sex jungle; and dilapidated shacks in settlements such as Mathare Valley and Nairobi River, all populated by the most deprived people of a major urban centre in Africa.

- 31 The novel focuses on two characters, Ben and Ocholla, close friends and colleagues working as casual labourers on a construction site in the city centre—Development House. Kurtz (1998, 127) points out Development House as an indicator of Nairobi's class contradictions since it “is located on Haile Selassie Avenue at the edge of the financial and business district and next to the site for a new 800-bed tourist hotel”. Urban outcasts participate actively in building the edifices, hallmarks of capitalism that would eventually exclude them since the spaces are only accessible to them during construction. Furthermore, Development House seems a symbol of Kenya where the impoverished populace labour against all the odds only to build an economy that would exclude them from the country's vital resources.
- 32 Through the depictions of the lives of Ben and Ocholla, the author offers glimpses into the social histories of Nairobi's marginal spaces that define their existences. These are precarious spaces where danger and frustrations hound the underprivileged. Ben is a former lieutenant in the Sixth Army who was dismissed for smuggling a military mortar to bank robbers (see pp. 57–60). But the novel concentrates more on how the disgraced Ben navigates the squalid, outlandish existences in the slums. Ben's situation shows that even people in higher class strata of society can drift economically and become slum dwellers. Somehow, as I illustrate below, the novelist creates the impression that to survive in the worst slums of Nairobi one may require military survival skills.
- 33 The novel begins with Ben living with Wini, an office secretary and a good-time girl. Wini has a child named Baby whom she locks up in the house most of the time when she is out working as a secretary or prostitute. Although she offers Ben great comfort and hope, pays rent and buys food, she later abandons him and Baby and gets married to her boss, “a strange white man” (p. 7). Ocholla, for his part, is confounded by the responsibilities of providing for his two wives and several children who usually live in a rural area but have unexpectedly moved to the city and joined him in his dilapidated shack. Ben and Wini's child, Ocholla and his two wives and children, embody Nairobi's slum families subject to unpredictable expansions because of rural-urban migration, as in the case of Ocholla's family, or unpredictable shrinkage due to disappearances of some family members as in the case of Wini.
- 34 The novelist writes of the Nairobi slums in a quest to demystify colonial constructs of slums as a danger to the city and therefore deserving demolition. The demolitions exhibit nostalgia from the colonial policies on vagrancy and public health discussed earlier. Here, Mwangi constructs slum dwellers in terms of their usefulness to the city economy, as the hub of the informal sector economy and source of the casual labourers who build the city. This is clearly reflected in Ben's gaze at the Mathare Valley while on a bus:

“The shuddering monster rattles east along the lip of Mathare Valley. From up here the shanty town appears just as a rubbish heap of paper, scrap iron, dust and smoke. Appearances are deceptive. Down there live enough construction labourers, unlicensed fruit peddlers and illicit liquor brewers to cause concern to the whole city police. It can be nightmarish hunting for vagrants down there. Almost everyone is a vagrant, that is including women and children. And they drink *Changaa* and smoke *bhanga*, two things that cannot stand the sight of a policeman.² A few coppers have got themselves knocked cold by unknown assailants down there. Coppers find it easier to follow behind the City Council constabulary who have the right to raze the place down any day in the interest of public health. In the resulting smoke and chaos the policemen descend into the forbidden valley, make a few desperate arrests, then scramble out before the place regenerates into solid, obstinate, granite resistance to law and order.” (1976, 160–61)

- 35 Here, the novel satirises the paranoid city council’s construct of slum dwellers as invaders of the city. The authorities’ ambition is to host the rich and powerful who would fast-track the city’s economic glamour. Despite the vicious war waged against slum dwellers, it becomes obvious that the slum has developed powerful defence mechanisms for its survival.
- 36 The Nairobi City Council’s brutal demolitions of slums traceable to colonial segregation policies, particularly the persistence of the 1939 colonial Public Health Act, can be glimpsed in what the novel outlines: the “City Council constabulary [...] have the right to raze [slums] any day in the interest of public health” (p. 161). Historically, Kinuthia Macharia (1992, 228) observes, “Kenyan leaders [...] were trying hard to prove that they could maintain ‘law and order,’ especially in the overcrowded capital [hence] the old colonial policy of slum demolition was reinstated with much vigour and wrath, yet still officially justified by the Public Health Act.” The 1970s slum demolitions were mainly geared towards attaining economic relevance in the global space, as a city safe for foreign investors but at the peril of its urban outcasts. Neoliberal capitalist investors’ preferences usually include a ‘safe’ city, which means a city populated with a consumer class with disposable income.
- 37 In the novel, after the City Council razes Ocholla’s shanty, Ocholla tells Ben: “Four years I have said things to those monkeys Ben [...]. Called them brothers, citizens, everything! And every time they went and razed down the hut, anyway” (1976, 203). The emphasis here is on the question of citizenship, a status which guarantees individuals’ enjoyment of civil, political and social rights from their state. But this status, as outlined earlier, is historically tied to ethnic homelands, an anomaly conveniently exploited by the state either to consolidate political power or chastise those who exist beyond such boundaries, especially when in pursuit of certain political or economic goals. In this imagined case, Ocholla’s vainly appeals to both tribal and citizenry identity categories where neoliberal capitalism is the force driving the overhauling of the city space.
- 38 The setting of Ben and Ocholla’s shanty in Nairobi River Valley is significant with regard to slum demolition histories of 1970s Nairobi. That history is well captured by James Winpenny (1979, 119–20) who observes that in the early 1970s, “[s]quatter settlements were under constant threat of demolition [and in the] extreme case [of] the settlement in the Nairobi River Valley... squatters had to dismantle their shacks every morning and reassemble them every night in order to evade destruction and loss.” Even though Winpenny’s observations appear several years later after the publication of *Going Down River Road*, they corroborate and reinforce the historical veracity of the novelists’ portrayals of slum demolitions in 1970s Nairobi.

- 39 The narrator reveals that the “health enforcement gang” (1976, 201) descends on the informal settlement at dawn and razes it to the ground. By referring to the city council officers as a gang, the narrator reveals not the illegality of the council’s actions but their excessive brutality as well as slum dwellers’ aggression towards the city authorities. To a slum dweller, as Ben discovers when he is rendered homeless and forced to take refuge in Ocholla’s shack, “a shanty hut [is] the absolute possession, the retreat of the vanquished heart” (1976, 186). In this sense, the shanty is cast as slum dwellers’ last fort, the trenches where they nurse their psychosocial and economic wounds as they strategize their offensive against the forces of exploitation or, at the least, forces bent on banishing them from the city.
- 40 *Going Down River Road* highlights Ocholla’s dwelling space that defies the limits of human dignity: the hut itself “happens to be the only one along the whole Nairobi River with a sloping roof supported on a leaning wall in a way that would make any architect start believing in miracles” (1976, 184). It is partly roofless, what one of Ocholla’s children refers to as “a window in the roof” (p. 212). As for the door, Ben observes: “The door screams shut on its own; an engineering genius achieved by using old tyre bands for hinges” (p. 185). Ocholla’s outlandish existence is emphasised by the “ridiculously little pot,” Ben calls it “toy pot” (p. 186), which he uses to cook his food. This verisimilitude enlivens the infantilising and dehumanising nature of slum life, robbing inhabitants of human dignity and, to some extent, impairing their agency to transform their circumstances.
- 41 The slum transforms itself into contestation between the city council attempting to conceal intractable poverty and slum dwellers fighting for survival and belonging. Despite callous demolitions, the shanties still emerge by evening: “There is something malignant about shanty huts. They go up in the smoke at dawn, spring to life again by twilight” (1976, 204). The author’s use of the term ‘malignancy’ demonstrates the city authority’s attitude to the slum problem: slums to them seem vermin or chronic disease resistant to the antidote injected by the health gang. The term furthermore reveals the slum dwellers’ unbreakable resilience. The conflict over the presence of slums in Nairobi accentuates the city’s reluctance to invest in affordable housing for the impoverished, just as colonial Nairobi was reluctant to tolerate more than ‘needed’ Black people’s presence in the city. Hence, in *Going Down River Road*, Ocholla’s invocation of the idea of the citizenship of a slum dweller is a pertinent one: it speaks to governments that trample on the civil liberties of urban outcasts.
- 42 Apart from city regulators’ demolitions of slums in their quest to create space for multibillion dollar empires, the demolitions also appear as driven by the need to conceal the city’s runaway intractable poverty. Built space affirms a country’s economic development, a would-be credit to African regimes after colonialism. Whereas the mushrooming of absurd contraptions as dwelling places acutely disrupts state narratives of rapid development. Indeed, the state’s development façade prove costly to slum dwellers as it only profits the rich and powerful who are allocated prime land formerly occupied by slums for expansion of their business empires.
- 43 A comparative view of slum demolitions in 1970s and 1990s Kenya would help shed light on how governments trample on the civil liberties of urban outcasts. While slum demolitions in Jomo Kenyatta’s regime in the 1970s were mainly driven by neoliberal capitalism, in the subsequent Daniel Moi’s regime slum demolitions would become largely political. In her study on the demolition of Muoroto slum in Nairobi, Jacqueline

Klopp (2008, 295) draws a relationship between urban outcasts' struggles for democratic space and the consequent slum demolitions: "in the early 1990s when the fight over multi-party elections started to intensify, slum demolitions were unusual in their scope and brutality." Klopp elucidates that the Moi regime that was fighting against a wave of protest for the re-introduction of multiparty politics weighed in on the Muoroto slum dwellers that were pro-multiparty and burnt them out of the city. Here, "slum clearance was a way to punish insubordination by withdrawing access to land and, conversely, a way to reward loyalty by re-allocating vacated land to political supporters" (2008, 295). To the regime of the time, slum dwellers' active participation in opposition politics was insubordination to the government that had the powers to withdraw their citizenship in the city. This aberration regularly manifests itself in Nairobi slums which suffer the brunt of police brutality whenever there is a political crisis. For instance, during the 2007/2008 post-election violence and Covid-19 containment measures in 2020, the police perpetrated disproportionate atrocities in the slums (see Okia 2011, Mutahi & Wanjiru 2020). This implies that citizenship in the city is the preserve of the state.

- 44 In the case of informal sector enterprises portrayed in *Going Down River Road*, one notes crude capitalist measures enforced by the city council to ensure Nairobi castaways are locked out of economic advancement. The novel depicts the city council's eviction of the urban outcasts' food vendors in a way that shows the city's haste to make room for major capitalists through constructions of tourist hotels and other commercial centres, but at the expense of destroying the informal sector economy. The workers on the construction site for Development House have specific food kiosks where they buy their lunch: Hilotoni, Tree Bottoms and Sukuma Wiki. These food kiosks operate within the logic of the city's low-income workers such as selling low-cost meals mostly on credit, and are part of what Ato Quayson (2010, 76), in the context of Accra's food vendors, terms "improvisation [that] engenders a particular experience of street life." The names of the food kiosks carry meanings that relate to the low-income workers' simultaneous aspiration to and parody of the affluent establishments they are excluded from: Hilotoni references Nairobi's Hilton Hotel; Tree Bottoms, an inversion of Nyeri's Tree Tops tourist hotel that overlooks Mt Kenya, built in 1932. Sukuma Wiki (a Kiswahili expression that literally means 'push the week') refers to kale, the most affordable vegetable familiar to Nairobi's impoverished, but also codifying the urban outcasts' struggles to survive on limited finances from week to week, thanks to affordable kiosk meals.
- 45 The aspirational allusions to the affluent centres is characteristic of the city's low-income zones where "commerce is dressed in the garments of faith [where] the laborer's appetite works for him and hunger drives him firmly into the bosom of the capitalist circuit" (Quayson 2010, 94). In the novel, "the City Council's good-health brigade" (1976, 165) thwarts the economic aspirations of the Nairobi roadside food vendors. Using claims of a cholera outbreak, the city council destroys "all the roadside kiosks and other insanitary eating places" (165). The narrator notes: "There are rumours rife that the Council will build organized sanitary Food Kiosks but no mention was made of when. Or what the food prices will be like. Neither did they say precisely who will own the new sanitary eating places nor what they will do with the old man Hilotoni and his one-eyed wife and semi-illiterate son" (165). Here, the narrator expresses his disenchantment with the city control measures that destroy the economies of the urban outcasts without offering any alternatives to their livelihoods.

The narrator alludes to the possibility of the city authority instituting a middle-class investor in a confirmed food market. In fact, a labourers' pseudo parliament at the construction site where Machore is the speaker, speculates that the "Minister for Food owns all the food kiosks in Eastleigh, [h]is wife owns half the Tree Bottoms Hotels empire, [and] they are applying for a Sukuma Wiki retail monopoly" (1976, 103). The labourers' anxieties underscore the penetration of slumlords' parasitic capitalism in the spaces of low-income urbanites.

- 46 Indeed, the novel depicts most slum dwellers as innovative and hardworking people constrained by structural barriers to the achievement of economic success. It questions the taxation of low-income workers living in squalid conditions, a signal that city planners do not provide necessary social amenities. Ocholla's dislike of taxation is a political statement: "The Indian has just sliced off a fat chunk of my money and called it tax. [...]. Before you know it we may be working one lousy month to earn a small slip labelled TAX" (1976, 189). The notion of slicing and the foregrounding of tax imprints in the reader the crude *axing* of slum dwellers' livelihoods. This is a humanitarian call to tax exception for the low-income workers who find it difficult "balancing something that has no centre like a labourer's budget" (1976, 189).
- 47 But slum conditions are not limited to absurd tin, tyre and sticks contraptions; they extend to high density block tenements with appalling living conditions. This aspect is explored in detail in Meja Mwangi's *The Cockroach Dance* (1979) which presents a liminal space where Nairobi castaways' dreams of better housing are shattered by gruelling exploitation that eventually entraps them in sickeningly squalid tenements. Here, Meja Mwangi further demonstrates how housing defines human dignity. The limelight is on a fictional Dacca House built by "old Kachra Samat, now retired to a generous mansion in the cool and quiet of suburbia" (1979, 77). By suburbia, the narrator is referring to the "formerly whites-only suburbs outside the city centre" (p. 82). Upon independence, racist laws that defined the city's residential geography were abolished. The nostalgia for colonial power would drive political and social elites of Asian and African descent to scramble for suburbia. As for Dacca House, the narrator notes, Kachra Samat built it in a manner that reminded him of his original homeland in New Delhi, India (p. 80). But upon the exodus of Indians to suburbia, their houses located in the poorest parts of the city but closer to the business district were bought by affluent Africans who converted them into bars, brothels, garages and residences. Dacca House is bought by Tumbo Kubwa, "Big Belly", an allegorical name that signals the greed that drives a corrupt, neoliberal capitalist.
- 48 Despite the fact that Africans had collectively suffered under the yoke of colonialism, upon independence, political elites who had promised social reforms appear to have chosen a shockingly neoliberal capitalist pathways. Meja Mwangi captures the neoliberal capitalist fervour through satire: "This brothel-mania amazed Dusman. It was an itch of the newly-affluent Africans to turn all newly-acquired property into bars and brothels, a phenomenon which had led one reckless foreign entrepreneur into stating that Africans could not think beyond bars and brothels, and that, given a chance, they would convert the whole city into one vast brothel" (p. 79). Even though the reckless foreigner is deported, the brothel-mania makes sense to Dusman who is hemmed in by the absurdity unleashed by neoliberal capitalism.
- 49 Dusman notes that Tumbo Kubwa makes a fortune from Home Boarding and Lodging at the junction of Hasrat Road and River Road. He owns and manages four floors where

sixty girls practise prostitution in shared rooms at daily charges: “In absolute terms the rooms fetched more money than tourist hotels in town” (p. 111). On the ground floor of Home Building are strategically located Dr Patel K Patel’s Surgery and Tumbo Kubwa’s bars. The narrator reveals that Dr Patel, originally trained as a veterinary, had converted to human medicine purposely to treat sexually transmitted maladies contracted upstairs in the lodgings. The striking intersections of the enterprises on the ground floor and the flesh industry upstairs demonstrate a neat capitalist web. The irony of a veterinary transfiguring into a urologist because of market demands cannot be gainsaid.

- 50 The bodies of prostitutes are traded exhaustively to maximize profit for the chief pimp, Tumbo Kubwa. In fact, in order to dissuade the prostitutes from trading independently, Tumbo Kubwa inadvertently foments a hostile environment against street prostitutes—a capitalist design to push street prostitutes into more regimented rooming arrangements such as Home Boarding and Lodging where, apparently, “the girls had protection from pimps, the police and thugs” (p. 111). It is important to note that Tumbo Kubwa is the councillor of the city hence tasked with an oversight role on the city's welfare and security, but he prioritises his economic interests over the welfare of street prostitutes.
- 51 Neoliberalism advocates for “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms” (Harvey 2005, 2) to maximize wealth creation. It is in this regard that Dacca House is imagined as a would-have-been brothel: due “to its poor location, [Dacca House] escaped the fate, worse than death, that had overtaken most of the formerly Indian properties on River and Grogan Roads—that of being turned into bars and brothels after the Indian sold out to Africans” (p. 79). As a business object, the new owner works on making Dacca House churn out profits. In fact, Dacca House used to accommodate one extended family housed in fifteen spacious rooms. But upon acquiring the property, Tumbo Kubwa hires “a gang of freelance carpenters, masons, and plumbers” (p. 83) who repartition the flats into “thirty single rooms”, with each room only “slightly larger than a giant packing crate” (p. 84). Through these alterations, Tumbo Kubwa maximizes his profits to ten times what the original owner used to collect as house rent. This worsens the housing conditions of Nairobi castaways well demonstrated in characters such as Sukuma Wiki’s family where his numerous children sleep under the bed and Sukuma Wiki and his wife are forced to engage in intimate matters strictly at noon, when the children are out.
- 52 The novel carves Dacca House as a relapse of decent housing to slum life, embodying the elusive promise of social mobility. In occupying the repartitioned block, “[t]enants from the shanty houses along the river were just as determined to get a house of their own, grateful that at last there was a chance to live in the city, with electricity, running water, and sewage disposal” (p. 154). Unfortunately, Dacca House would transmute into a haunting, sickeningly squalid dwelling space that symbolically requires psychiatric intervention. This is a crowded dwelling space where over 70 people share one bathroom and one blocked toilet. In the prologue, the narrator observes that the smell of food being cooked in the block locks “horns with the perpetual odour issuing with an almost audible hiss from the overflowing garbage cans and the toilet out in the yard” (n.p). Dacca House is also overwhelmingly invaded by cockroaches and rats.
- 53 Worst of all, Tumbo Kubwa’s unbridled pursuit for profits is underscored in the spectacle of the Bathroom Man who haunts not only Dusman Gonzaga but also the

reader. This is a tenant who rents a bathroom next to a blocked toilet, where he lives with his wife and child. Through the Bathroom Man, the novelist demonstrates how poor housing strips slum dwellers of human dignity. In a conversation with a psychiatrist Dr. Bates, Dusman Gonzaga asks disturbing questions: “Why should a human being live in a dank bathroom and pay for it? I mean, why do they let it happen?” (p. 131). In his soul-searching, Gonzaga wonders, “before he became the *Bathroom Man*, what was he? Who was he? And what would he become if he tired of, and quit being the *Bathroom Man*? (pp. 137–138). Even when tenants present their complaints to the city’s rent tribunal regarding pathetic living conditions at Dacca House, the authorities take no action.

- 54 Dacca House is a symbol of stalled dreams of economic freedom. The Nairobi outcasts’ efforts to escape the miseries of slum life seem to stagnate on the margins of the city. Dusman Gonzaga reveals to the psychiatrist Dr. Bates that he usually dreams about migrating from Dacca House to the suburbs: “It is a big and green place, fresh and healthy like... like some places I have seen out in the suburbs” (p. 142). But he never gets to the destination of his dreams because a door always violently shuts him out. The doors that shut him out are the measures capitalists have put in place to ensure the poor remain poor, or deteriorate even further.
- 55 The reason Dusman is obsessed with going back to reading water metres for the city council is the vicarious access to suburbs. When he was a water metre reader, he experienced the fresh air, quiet view, well-trimmed and naturally scented lawns of suburbia (p. 39). But his current job as a parking metre reader restricts him to the chaos and miseries of the city centre. Nevertheless, both jobs guarantee him a miserly pay which entraps him in Dacca House. Because of the meagre salary, Dusman is rendered incapable of repairing his car, a Triumph Herald he bought when he was working at the Sunshine Hotel. After he was fired, a job he secured at the city council accelerates his downward drift. The Triumph, thus, was his “only touch with the past and his only hope for the future” (p. 34). It was his promise of a brighter future: “What Dacca House took out of his personality, the car gave back. [...]. But most of all she was his ticket out of Dacca House. As long as she was there, he knew he would one day leave” (p. 8). Hence, when Grogan Road thieves steal the wheels and other vital parts of the Triumph, and Dusman is forced to sell the remaining parts to the Bathroom Man, we note the collapse of his dreams of economic progression.
- 56 One remarkable aspect in Meja Mwangi’s *Going Down River Road* and *The Cockroach Dance* is the role the city council’s leadership plays in making wretched the lives of Nairobi’s residents. While the city’s constabulary gang descend with vindictiveness and violence on slum dwellers in Mathare and along Nairobi River in *Going Down River Road*, in *The Cockroach Dance* the city council’s junior employees are unmasked as helpless, exploited agents of the city’s rich barons. It becomes clear that the foot soldiers who raze the slums are urban outcasts hired to execute the schemes of the city’s business barons and the bosses at the city council. The overzealous junior council employees’ vengeful acts in rich people’s residences prove futile. For instance, Dusman’s life is endangered by deadly dogs that make suburbia homes almost inaccessible. In retaliation, Dusman hikes water and electricity consumption charges, yet the rich do not even notice (p. 42).
- 57 Furthermore, *The Cockroach Dance* unearths incompetence, corruption, ethnic jingoism and paranoia at the centre of the city council’s leadership. The water and sewage metres superintendent, Kimende (small-roach), embodies the city council’s paranoia as

well as his obsession with insanitary habitation. The leadership crisis is noted in the city councillor Tumbo Kubwa's greed to amass insurmountable wealth; in the city council's metres Superintendent Kimende who exhibits mild schizophrenia and inimitable incompetence; and the mayor who is indifferent to professionalism in regard to city planning. Dusman decries infrastructural crises: "The city was originally designed by a squad of drunken monkeys with forged architecture degrees. Sewers from up there in the city centre led to sewers down here on Grogan Road and into the river behind" (p. 311).

Conclusion

- 58 This article has engaged with novelistic portrayals of Nairobi's castaways' social histories of the 1970s, the dawn of the age of neoliberal capitalism. It explored manifestations and effects of neoliberalism on urban outcasts portrayed in selected novels: the socio-economic exploitation of slum dwellers, slum demolitions, onslaughts on the informal sector economy. The expulsion of impoverished slum dwellers from the city through slum demolitions was meant to create space for establishing multibillion dollar empires on vacated prime land. The article has demonstrated that government players operate by opportunistically envisaging that if evicted from the city's slums, Nairobi castaways may return to their rural ancestral homes. Yet, such groups have long severed their ties with their supposed ethnic homelands – a colonial construct that is only mobilised for convenience. Furthermore, the article demonstrated how slum dwellers' extremely poor housing strip them of human dignity. This, too, was linked to the effects of neoliberal capitalism.
- 59 However, the plight of slum dwellers cannot be exclusively understood through neoliberal capitalist incursions, but also as a result of political actions often leveraging the desperate living conditions of slum dwellers to either use them or crush them. In fact, slums in Kenya are renowned theatres of political confrontations. For instance, in the 1990s, during the struggle for multi-partyism, conflicts in the slums in Kenya were politically incited and, as a result, targeted by a repressive police force. During post-election violence in 2007/2008, police brutality was unprecedented. Similarly, during the 2020 Covid-19 epidemic, enforcement of containment measures announced by Kenya's Ministry of Health occasioned police maiming and killings in slums across the country. There have also been cases where, whenever tragedies such as fire and slum demolitions occur, political actors intervene with donations of basic needs. Considering their unwillingness to institute robust policies and programs to improve slum dwellers' lives, politicians' interventions are suspect, mainly aimed at gaining political mileage.
- 60 The cases discussed in this paper exhibit a neoliberal state's acrimony towards slum dwellers who appear as not only stripped of legal protection but also unjustly depicted as a volatile group that can easily cause political instability. The novels critiqued in this paper unveil a dark picture of the human and social tragedy often experienced in slums as precipitated by neoliberal capitalist interests in Kenya.

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NOTES

1. Jomo Kenyatta (1968, 232–33) states: "Our greatest asset in Kenya is our land. This is the heritage we received from our forefathers. In land lies our survival and salvation. It is in this knowledge that we fought for the freedom of our country."
2. *Chang'aa* is a traditional, distilled alcohol with up to 53% ethanol.

ABSTRACTS

This article is a critique of Nairobi city's socio-political histories as portrayed in Kenyan literary works of the 1970s, focusing on Mwangi Gicheru's *Across the Bridge* (1979), Charles Mangua's *Son of Woman* (1971), Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* (1976) and *The Cockroach Dance* (1979). The article conveys insights on urban castaways by reading the city as a canvas onto which novels reconfigure the nation's histories that feature through various characters who impress their

hopes, aspirations, desires upon a city that is indifferent to them. It engages with Nairobi castaways' fictional realities but links them to Nairobi's social histories. The focus is on slum demolitions, the persistence of colonial vagrancy laws, which also informs state operatives' insistence on expelling Nairobi castaways from slums for them to return to their presumed ancestral homes in rural areas. The demolitions and expulsions appear a simplistic way to navigate city aesthetics, to tackle congestion and crime. The article advances the argument that the plight and persecution of Nairobi castaways as portrayed in the selected literary works and in reality is exacerbated by the Kenyan government's historically uncritical adoption of neo-liberal capitalism, an offshoot of colonial capitalism. Indeed, the selected novels reveals the novelists' critical assessment and exposure of the underlying exploitations of marginalised urbanites by both local and foreign neoliberal capitalists.

INDEX

Keywords: Kenyan urban novels, Nairobi castaways, slum demolitions, informal sector, social histories, capitalism

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