Introduction

Literature has always given a voice to the oppressed, a silent friend to the aching soul, and a helping hand to those grappling in the dark recesses of the human mind. Contemporary literature reflects this tendency of art in general and the written word in particular to give a mode of expression to those who need to voice their opinions either of their own accord or as a means of respite and restitution to the general public at large. This function is served well by the emerging literatures in developing and third world countries, which find themselves struggling to build a foundation on which to rest the future of their nations, while at the same time catering to the immediate needs that have arisen because of the abrupt end of an entire system of governance. The literature emerging in the newly independent African countries deserves a special mention in this regard.

All modes of African imaginative expression are a reflection of African experience having literary and cultural significance. The experiences of the brutal assault of slavery; colonialism and racism dishonouring the Black race; the invasions on the African identity are recent in the memory of African writers. This colours their view of contemporary circumstance thereby determining themes and orientations of modern expression. This modern literature is generated because of the complexes generated in African sensibility in response to its history. Thus, generated by the traumatic collective experience of colonisation these writings strongly reflect the resistance to the colonial invasion of African Cultural space. It would be fruitful to briefly trace out the history of the African continent at this stage.

The African continent is massive and intricate and so is its history. The continent which is also known as the ‘birth place of humanity’ has witnessed human evolution from proto-bacteria to dinosaurs to the ape that walked on two feet (*Australopithecines*) to *Hominids* to *Homo habilis* to finally *Homo sapiens* (modern man). Since then world shaking events have shaped the continents’ history. Hunting and foraging made way for agriculture. Man started tilling and living in societies and when the vast green pastures from North to East (present day great Sahara desert) were no longer tillable, he migrated southwest deeper into the jungles and rainforests to start the age of the African empires. While Europeans were still primitive, the Africans were developing commercial empires
and complex urban societies. Many of these civilisations were short lived while some flourished with influence that reached far and beyond Africa into Asia and Europe. The Egyptians, the Phoenicians and finally the Arabs, to name a few, have had a lasting impact on the demography of the continent.

Soon it was the Europeans, fuelled by political, economic and social desires, who ventured into the Dark Continent and by the late 20th century, Africa faced their imperialist aggression, diplomatic pressures, military invasions, and eventual conquest and colonisation. The most fundamental and dramatic changes took place between 1880 and 1935 when Africa came in prolonged and extensive contact with Europe. The contact which led to many changes started with the conquest and occupation of virtually the whole of Africa. The establishment of the colonial system by the imperial powers is responsible for the present underdevelopment of Africa. The period after 1910 saw that Europe and Africa were combined in a single system of capital imperialism, this period was essentially one of consolidation and imperialism. As late as 1800 only limited areas had come under the direct rule of Europe but the growing technological and economic gap provided Europe the opportunity to move into the imperialist epoch which also meant capitalist expansion. It meant that:

European capitalists were forced by the internal logic of their competitive system to seek abroad in less developed countries opportunities to control raw material supplies, to find markets, and to find profitable fields of investment. The centuries of trade with Africa contributed greatly to that state of affairs where European capitalists were faced with the necessity to expand in a big way outside their national economies. (Rodney 136)

Slave trade was the direct fallout of the imperial conquest. Few regions in Africa had a slave trade of their own. Tribes would fight battles amongst themselves for land or slaves and capture men as spoils of war and often sell them to Arabs. The Europeans exploited this practice on a mass scale for a few centuries, which contributed tremendously in the economic and commercial expansion of Europe during the colonial era, and it stopped when collective conscience of the European society and the free world at large deemed it inhuman.
Although, African societies put up various forms of resistance against the attempts to colonise their countries and impose foreign domination the European conquest was complete by the end of the twentieth century. The conquest lasted a century. Soon, resentment against colonial occupation lead to political agitation which resulted in the emergence of western educated African politicians like Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Dr Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, leading their countries to independence subsequently after the Second World War. Thus began de-colonisation of Africa and within two decades of the 1945 UN charter on right to self-determination, colonialism collapsed in the world including Africa. Post-independence modern African nations were defined by boundaries agreed between colonial powers. The new nations soon saw themselves amidst a new era of cold war and power blocs. The young and politically vulnerable nations would either align themselves with the communist ideology of the Soviet Union or the capitalist agenda of the United States of America and its European allies. The majority of African nations achieved independence in the 60s but the colonial system transcended into the system of neo-colonialism. Thus starting the last stage of imperialism, i.e., neo-colonialism.

The genesis of the concept of neo-colonialism is till date not explicit. Though over the past fifty years, the concept of neo-colonialism has been developed by many scholars and has become central to debates, yet there is no consensus on its exact meaning. No official definition of the term exists. The inception of the term is attributed to Jean-Paul Sartre, who coined the term in 1956 in his essay “Colonialism is a System.” The essay originally given as a speech at Wagram on 27 January 1956 was written at the beginning of the Algerian war of independence and is now included in his book *Colonialism and Neocolonialism.* It gives insights into the mechanics of colonial economies giving detailed analysis of French colonialism in Algeria. The colonial empire was crumbling and Sartre tried to bring in the key issues of that time. The essay by critiquing French policies in Algeria gained significance in the anti-colonial struggle. Sartre says incisive things about the government at the time and advocates violent means to achieve French disengagement in Algeria.

A clearly identifiable definition was given by the All-African People’s Conference
as “the survival of the colonial system in spite of formal recognition of political independence in emerging countries, which become victims of an indirect and subtle form of domination by political, economic, social, military, or technical means” (Martin 191), in the 1961 resolution on Neo-colonialism. The term widely and commonly came to be applied to Africa in the latter part of the twentieth century. The critical concept of neo-colonialism since the first recorded use is relevant particularly to the understanding and analysis of African politics. High-income nations, specifically European nations had colonised most of the African continent in the late nineteenth century and after granting independence to the continent in the decades after World War II it did not stop reaping benefits accrued to it by the subjugated states.

The African writers are acutely aware of the harsh socio-political realities of their time, and the problems generated by the legacy of their imperialist past that still haunts their nations. The African writers’ traumatic experiences are depicted in their works, and this strain colours their creative discourse. This commonality is shared by many major African writers, and their ideological perspectives are thus influenced by their connections to their native land and its colonial past. Critic Janheinz Jahn has recommended the term “neo-African literature” for the body of writings produced by blacks in the modern age and in European languages on both the sides of Atlantic; notable for the unification of the point of reference and vision. It is the imaginative expression of Blacks forming one “tradition of similar styles and attitudes” (22). According to Janheinz Jahn, “Neo-African literature, then, is the heir of two traditions: traditional African literature and Western literature” (22). Chinua Achebe, Es’kia Mphahlele, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah and Meja Mwangi are the prominent African writers writing in this vein. Their works reflect how political independence did not end the colonial rule in Africa. In fact these modern writers treat modern Africa as neo-colonial rather than post-colonial. In the wake of political independence of the African nations, all the colonial evils and abuses prevalent in the neo-colonial society such as political earnestness, visceral writhing at public hypocrisy, economic exploitation, humbling effects of poverty and corruption were brought out and earnestly handled by the African writers. The subsequent desolation of hope post-independence did lead to disappointment amongst the masses which infuses the writings of these authors.
Among these writers, special significance attaches to the work of Ayi Kwei Armah and Meja Mwangi as they present the cutting edge of the struggle against colonialism and its recent form neo-colonialism. In order to understand the pressing concerns in the novels of Armah and Mwangi, it is important to take note of the generation in which they came to maturity. Their novels cannot be divorced from context; they have to be read in context as the stories are meaningful only when examined in relation to the facts and circumstances of their expression. They forge a compelling story to explicate the issues of their times. The narrative design and ideology of the novels emphasize that both the novelists are situated within a shared framework of experience. What unites both the writers are the impulses grounded in “common experience and common cultural references” (Irele, *The African Imagination 3*).

Armah was born in Sekondi, Takoradi, a major port town in former British Gold Coast, in the year 1939 when Ghana was still a colony of Britain. He grew up in this British colonial port in a multilingual environment. Armah grew up during a period of fervent nationalistic activity. His impressionable youthful years were, therefore, inevitably influenced by the growth of political parties, particularly Kwame Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party. The 1966 coup d’état that toppled the government of Kwame Nkrumah, the Ghanaian leader who had held power since 1957, significantly influenced Armah’s views about corruption in politics and he harshly criticized Nkrumah’s administration.

Around the time when his country gained freedom he was studying at Achimoto College situated at Ghana’s capital which had also produced eminent personalities like Kwame Nkrumah and Kofi Awoonor, the writer. The college ironically as a scheme by British was a breeding ground for training the neo-African elite. This elite creating institution was deliberately set up along the lines of British public schools. Being part of this privileged institution granted him a status of Ghanaian elite and this predicament is evident with his thematic preoccupation of pertinently analysing the role of education in his works. The guilt of being in this patrician atmosphere permeates through his consciousness.

As gleaned from various critical sources, Armah maintained an intensely private
life just preoccupied with his stint in writing and distancing himself from discussing his craft. He was not interested to give comments either on his life or his works. But he came forward to clear the mistaken pronouncements regarding his works and his personal life. The work by American critic Charles Larson, *The Emergence of African Fiction*, contained mistaken assumptions regarding his novels and life which Armah attempted to correct in an article “Larsony or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction.” And at another occasion in his article “One Writer’s Education,” Armah responded to certain biographical information by Ojong Ayuk.

In fact, while discussing the mistaken assumptions of him by Larson he places in discussion the overall context of African literature. Making adept use of a deadly understatement and scathing sarcasm but overreaching personal indignation he writes about the writer’s commitment. Larson had attacked Armah saying that he was so western that Africans had rejected him, that because of his exile in the west, he did not remember his mother tongue. To Charles Larson’s objection that he rejected his society and moved away from it, that his movement was an “exile,” Armah explained that his stay in the West, first at Paris for three years and then briefly as staff at Massachusetts was for economic independence to live and work in Julius Nyerere’s Tanzania. Larson further attacked Armah on the ground that he had modelled his novels on the works of James Joyce. Armah challenged and refuted these allegations questioning:

> By what occult means does Larson say I have absorbed the influence of Joyce when I have never even once placed myself in contact with his work? Does Larson offer any textual evidence to back up his assertion? . . . Ordinarily, a scholar indicates the source of this type of information [about Armah’s is having said he no longer remembered his mother tongue] as precisely as he can. But Larson does the opposite. He takes care not to indicate in any way the source of his expert information about me. (“Larsony or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction” 12)

In the same essay Armah also addressed the issue of the West peddling the information about Africa. According to him the West doctored the information for their benefit. Armah condemns the western critics like Larson’s approach to African writing and states,
“the way to the pet assumptions of western racism is the claim that Africa is inferior and
the West is superior” (“Larsony or Fiction as Criticism of Fiction” 13). Armah alleges
that the West feels that creativity can’t take place in Africa.

After winning a scholarship in 1959 at the age of nineteen Armah moved to
America where he spent his first year at Groton School in Massachusetts, a prestigious
boarding school and then three years at Harvard. However, he did not stay at Harvard to
complete his final year. Disillusionment with the western education and the experience of
white racism made him abruptly end his term at the Harvard. It was during his absence of
Armah that his newly independent nation under the lingering effects of colonialism
descended into political chaos. One-party rule was overthrown by military takeover. In
his novel Why are We so Blest? Armah through his fictional counterpart, Modin Dofu,
narrates the experience of the political education he underwent in the States, working on
issues that are of concern to him and Africa at large. He altogether changed his stream
from literature to social sciences. As recalled by him in his article, “One Writer’s
Education,” that he changed the stream in order to fathom “the interconnections between
the economies of the continents, the politics of nations, and the sociology and cultures of
peoples” (1753). Armah subsequently states further in the article that he engaged himself
“from a contemplation of the arrangement of symbols, images and words, to a scrutiny of
the arrangements of social realities buried under those words, images and symbols”
(1753).

After his stint in America, Armah spent some time in Algeria where he worked as
a translator on the weekly Revolution Africaine. Here he encountered for the first time,
the post-colonial ennui. Armah was placed at a vantage point not only historically but
also geographically to get grasp of the events taking place. There he realized that
dependency on the Whites in Algeria had dissipated their revolution. Solo, his alter ego,
in his novel Why are We so Blest? concludes that in order to combat neo-colonialism,
separation of races is the best solution. In 1964 he returned to Ghana and worked briefly
as a scriptwriter for Ghana television. His experience in Ghana was again one of
disillusionment as he admits, that “there was nothing at home so unexpected as to shock
me . . .” (“One Writer’s Education” 1753). This statement is suggestive of the fact that
Armah’s creative output was influenced by a cumulative disillusionment rather than a sudden encounter with neo-colonial society of Ghana.

Thus, Armah’s return to homeland was disappointing. Armah’s imagination was occupied by the desolation immediately before the 1966 coup d’état that is why his first two novels are set in Ghana. His first novel not only probes through the level of an evocation of despair but digs much deeper for close analysis. Although Armah is considered as an ingenious and revolutionary writer, he is also acknowledged as the most controversial writer of Africa. Since the publication of his first novel, *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born*, he remains prominent on critical premises. The views of earlier reviewers, however, have stunted the critical faculties of later critics in that they ignored the seminal nature of the work and the criticism became repetitive. Armah’s work was extensively discussed as his work consistently and inconveniently raised vital issues. Fraser observes that right from the publication of Armah’s first novel to the present, “his reputation has been clouded by misunderstanding and a kind of critical irrelevance that have denied him the recognition his originality would seem to demand” (*The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* 1). Commenting on his originality Ode Ogede writes:

Armah is an experimental and innovative writer who should enrich our consciousness to an exceptional degree, however, the extent to which readers have been affected by his exploration of sensitive problems of society has been curtailed primarily by inattentiveness to his voice, his ability to give expression to experience through a new and startling range of utterances. (*Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast* 5)

However, while lauding Armah for his artistry and innovation, critics often label him as pessimist who offers little hope for the future. Greater critical understanding and acceptance of his agenda were realised with the publication of *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, although his detractors continued to find faults in the fictional portrayal of a new socio political order in Africa as vague and unrealistic. Some reviewers complain of Armah’s change in tone in later works, and accuse him of being too idealistic to inspire real change. A few reviewers also note a lack of detail in his vision for Africa’s future. As Adewale Maja-Pearce writes “Armah is a visionary writer in the strict sense.
This much at least must be conceded, even if the details of what are effectively promoted as a blueprint for a social and political arrangement are far too vague and simplistic to be convincing at any but the most hopeful level” (“Harbingers of Death” 15). Some critics contend that Armah presents racist, simplistic views in his works when he portrays all that is black as good, and all that is white as evil and corrupt.

Despite these criticisms, Armah is widely appreciated for the strength of his convictions and his desire to promote the betterment of the African continent. In his defense, in “Our Awakening,” Armah recalls that: “…I write books because I tried to do something more useful and failed. And since I’ve been trained to write, I do that as a defense against total despair” (video lecture 2010). Armah, thus, appears to be an extreme iconoclast who handles complex issues being more clear-sighted than others. He challenges the conventional ideas but even when he makes use of conventional strategies to make his point, he does it with unusual aptness.


Specific aspects of Armah’s writing have been the subjects of numerous shorter academic studies, some of which have been included in larger collections or published in journals. S. Nyamfukudza in his article “Drought and Rain” in *New Statesman* discusses how Armah, with outspoken courage and unrelenting commitment, grapples seriously with the waste, corruption and inefficiency resulting from the cultural confusion which is the post-colonial inheritance of Black Africa. In his essay “Oral Tradition and African Novel” in *Modern Fiction Studies* (1991), Edward Sackey analyses the innovative use of traditional African Oral Poetics in the structure, theme and style of novels by Armah.


A significant addition to the criticism on Armah is Ode Ogede’s book *Ayi Kwei Armah, Radical Iconoclast* (2000). Ogede regards Armah as a true African artist, one whose work is rooted strongly in African tradition, including the oral tradition. Gbemisola Adeoti in his critical essay, “The Re-Making of Africa: Ayi Kwei Armah and the Narrative of an (Alter)-native Route to Development” in *Africa Media Review* (2005) explores Ayi Kwei Armah’s novels with a view to analyse the author’s perceptions of and responses to Africa’s contemporary political history. Using the *The Beautyful Ones are not yet Born* (1968) and *Osiris Rising* (1995) for an in-depth study, the paper stresses the trajectory of Armah’s philosophical reflections on the troubled Africa especially related to governance and development. The article “The Writer and his Critics: A Critical Review of Studies on Ayi Kwei Armah’s Fiction” (2009), written by Charles A. Bodunde published in *KOLA*, is a review of criticisms on Ayi Kwei Armah. In this article he has explored the different critical standpoints on Armah’s works. Another paper presented in *African Nebula* (2011) by Alexander Dakubo Kabraka entitled “Ayi Kwei Armah’s Novels of Liberation,” examines *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* as novels of liberation. It seeks to show that the two novels are in a kind of continuous and conscious struggle against the forces of slavery and colonialism in the past and globalization and neo-colonialism in the present; forces which have plagued the African continent for so many years.
**A Saga of Black Deglorification: The Disfigurement of Africa in Ayi Kwei Armah’s Novels** by Moses Geoffrey Kwame Ayivor studies all the novels of Armah in terms of fictional disfigurement of Black Africa erupted from demonic anger post-independence. The text informs about the ideology of Armah in portraying post-colonial disillusionment by hinting that the present wreckage is caused by the past political violations. In fact, all of Armah’s work is concerned with the widening moral and spiritual chasm that existed between appearance and reality, spirit and substance, and past and present in his native Ghana.

A conclusive characteristic of the novels of Armah is African leadership’s betrayal of the continent. The themes which are introduced in his first novel like corruption of the ruling elite, parasiticism of the political leadership consistently resurface in his later novels. It is seen that Armah is concerned fundamentally with the ethical quality of the nation’s life and subsequently his hard-hitting critique of post-independent African society has invited much debate and criticism. He sees his nation’s health been strangled by an infectious foreign origin. The lethal originality of his vision can be attributed to his challenging of orthodox ideas with ground-breaking narrative intensity. He has been interested in the forces that cause social change due to his association with the social sciences. The extremely high moral integrity of his political vision forces him to rigorously scrutinize Africa’s progressive decline from the Edenic pre-colonial era through the slave trade and colonisation to the anomie associated with the post-independence period. Armah’s works are influenced by his reading of Fanon. Armah has mentioned in one of his articles that “the one theorist who has worked out consistent formulations concerning . . . a revolutionary restructuring of African society is Frantz Fanon” (“African Socialism” 29). Known for his visionary symbolism and poetic energy Armah attempted to forge an individual view of his society’s development. His narrative shows absorption of French school of thought rather than English and this characteristic links him with Senegalese novelist and film director, Sembene Ousmane.

Armah, until recently, has connected to his readers through his works only, unlike other African writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o who explicate their work, as Armah believed:
Many African writers discuss their work and themselves quite willingly, sometimes even eagerly, with Western critics, newspapermen, magazine pundits, radio commentators, television hosts and just plain dilettantes. That is their choice. I don’t. I have no personal contact whatsoever with any western critic of African literature. I have never granted any interview about my person or my work, no matter how prestigious the publication asking for it. That is my choice. I have never gone on lecture tours. I have never accepted invitations to Writers’ Conferences. And I have never, until now, found it necessary to write any article about my writing. (“One Writer’s Education” 11-12)

It is not surprising that all of Armah’s work is concerned with the question of Africa’s future. He has a unique position in the African literary tradition. Dan Izevbaye commenting upon his unique position says he has joined the line of African writers who “create taste for [their] own type of literary compositions by prescribing literary criteria and standards which are often more valuable in the appreciation of [their] own works than for the criticism of other works” (“I’ of the Beholder” 27).

Armah’s writing champions fidelity to the actual experiences, his own experiences around the world. His fictional recreation in The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born evokes the degradation of his people in his native place Ghana. His novel Why are We so Blest conveys his American experience. He altered his line of approach little in Two Thousand Seasons and took wider vistas taking a vast slice of human history. Apart from publishing seven novels—The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born (1968), Fragments (1970), Why are We so Blest? (1972), Two Thousand Seasons (1973), The Healers (1978), Osiris Rising (1995) and KMT: In the House of Life (2002), Armah has also written short stories and a series of polemical essays published in West Africa.

Meja Mwangi is another African writer concerned with the situation of his country post-independence. He began his writing career in the 1970’s, a decade after his more well-known compatriots such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Grace Ogot had been publishing their works. Mwangi was born on December 27, 1948 and grew up in Nanyuki. When he was fifteen, Kenya won its independence from Britain. Kenyans had revolted in
1952, taking up arms against British rule in what came to be known as the Mau Mau uprising. The insurrection lasted four years and colonial authorities took harsh measures in retaliation. Round-ups and detentions were common, and even young Mwangi and his mother were incarcerated briefly. The camp conditions made a lasting impression on him; inspired by these personal experiences he wrote *Carcase for Hounds* (1974) and *Taste of Death* (1975). These two novels were praised for the way in which they brought to life this intense period in Kenya’s history.

A product of the Nanyuki secondary school, Kenyatta College and Leeds University, Mwangi wrote prolifically about Kenya’s social conditions and history in humorous but realistic style. Before stupendous creative writing endeavours he worked for French television in Nairobi and for the British Council broadcasters. During 1970s he moved to Nairobi and started writing in spare time at the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in the mid-1970s. He was a Fellow in Writing at the Iowa University from 1975-6. Mwangi has worked in the film industry, engaging himself in screenwriting, assistant directing and casting and location management. He worked on such films as *Shadow on the Sun* (1988), *Gorillas in the Mist* (1985) and *Out of Africa* (1985).

Mwangi’s works can be divided into three sections. The novels of the first section concentrate on the anti-colonial Mau Mau insurgency of the 1950s. The Mau Mau struggle was a far reaching experience which Mwangi has captured in stories of unsuccessful guerrilla warfare against formidable adversaries. Mau Mau uprising that started in 1950 was a significant movement where the Kenyans took up armed resistance against the British colonial rule. It had the major participation of Kikuyu ethnic group and their bitterness aggravated when they were forced out of their lands. A large proportion of the land was eaten away by the white settlers and the Kikuyu people were economically marginalised. The settlement of European farmers left the locals fuming, forcing them to organise a resistance forming a splinter group taking a more militant form. Consequently, emergency was declared in 1952. Although since 1945 negotiations and a constitutional struggle were underway under the guidance of Jomo Kenyatta under the Kenyan African union (KAU), their demands for political reforms with peaceful attempts were denied. This
ultimately led to the cropping up of radical wing in the organisation. The colonial authorities moved army reinforcements in Kenya and used home guards to combat the resistance movement. The state of insurgency lasted until 1960. Mau Mau resistance played an instrumental role in hastening Kenya’s independence. Mau Mau rebels based themselves in forests of Mt. Kenya and Aberdares. This movement caused many killings, people were held in detention camps and an evil imperial power used internment and torture to keep hold of the colony.

African writers felt compelled to deal with the Mau Mau experience in one way or another, and Mwangi was no exception. He had experienced the emergency as a child, living in the area of the main conflict, and had turned fifteen two weeks after Kenya achieved political independence. The promises of political independence and the troubled time leading up to that point were central to his consciousness.

The second category of Mwangi’s writing comprises the thrillers he wrote during the late 1970s and 1980s which raised a debate concerning serious and popular literature. His novels of 1980s were modelled on western popular thriller and romance with non-African setting. Mwangi told in an interview that “My only mistake was that I didn’t use a pseudonym for my popular novels and use my own name for the rest. That way, I would have avoided all this criticism” (Kurtz 117).

Although the second category of texts put him in a raging critical debate, the third category, that of the urban trilogy, won him critical acclaim. The betrayal of hopes post-independence and the post-independence disillusionment is captured by Mwangi in the urban novels, stringently attacking the elite for seeking their selfish interests against collective good. The novels give a panoramic exposé of the corruption as to how different institutions are contributing in this malaise.

Mwangi’s fecund imagination let him produce a compelling and innovative set of texts. His work over the years received rave international acclaim and awards establishing him as a rising star of the Kenyan literary constellation. His contemporaries have talked about Mwangi with extravagant enthusiasm, such as Mbure who sees him as a great satirical writer, comfortable with his own style. Mutahi describes some of his
early works as fantastic and Chakava, the publisher, praises him as a writer of great repute. Comparing Mwangi with Charles Dickens in terms of both, his career and literary method, Simon Gikandi observes that, “Like the great Victorian novelist, Mwangi has staked his claim as the special correspondent of the metropolis who goes out of his way to probe the arteries that define and move the city, vividly dramatizing the lives of alienated and dehumanized characters” (Dictionary of Literary Biography 299).

Mwangi’s works are representative of the entire range of Kenyan fiction today; his productivity stands out in Kenyan literature. His urban novels especially display his commitment to talk about the plight of the people at bottom of the social ladder and are a manifestation of his concern with social and political problems of Kenya. He focuses on the young minds who are educated and are struggling to survive in the world of loss of hope and are driven into crime and delinquency. These novels are based on his first-hand experiences. The first novel of the trilogy, Kill Me Quick (1973), made a huge impact on the literary scene for which he received the Jomo Kenyatta award. Kill Me Quick, discussing the plight of young people, tells a story of two desperate young boys who are good in academics and motivated but become sufferers at the hands of European-fueled exploitation. The story charts their descent into thievery. The second novel of the trilogy, Going Down River Road (1976), exposes low life of people living on the periphery of Nairobi. The Cockroach Dance (1979), the third in the trilogy, “set in an opulent housing estate, highlights an impoverished meter reader’s slow-burning, but inexorable, fuse of rebellion” (Stringer, Oxford Companion 475).

Mwangi’s aim was to preserve a record of the recent past in these quasi-historical novels. He belongs to the second generation of Kenyan writers who deal with political climate in post-independence Kenya. As quoted by J. Roger Kurtz “If there is a single writer whose work is representative of the entire range of Kenyan narrative fiction today, it is Meja Mwangi” (1). The thematic preoccupation of his writing was to confront issues, especially the repressive climate which became more intense during the 1970s and 1980s. The dynamics of how tradition interacts with modernity in African society, according to Kurtz, is a major concern of African writing. Meja Mwangi’s writing attempts to come to terms with contemporary societal issues, the disintegration of village life following the
arrival of the Europeans in the colonial era, the disequilibrium caused by European formal
education, the torment of the “been-to”, the influence of the missionaries, the development
of a new African political and economic elite in the post-colonial setting and the dilemma
of life in the modern African city. Mwangi’s touching upon all these concerns shows his
awareness of the problems of Kenyan society and politics as a writer.

Critics have placed Mwangi alongside Ngugi wa Thiong’o as a part of a new wave
of East African writers who were proving to the literary world that postcolonial African
literature did not hail exclusively from West Africa.

In “Mirror of Reality: the Novels of Mwangi” (1983), Elizabeth Knight explains
that Mwangi used the language and metaphors of urban popular discourse and transferred
them into his novels. Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel
(1993) by J. Roger Kurtz, analyses the development of the Kenyan novel in English
emphasizing the historical contingencies affecting the production of literature in Kenya,
and how succeeding generations have drawn from and expanded the thematic repertoire by
the “first generation” of works in the 1960s. This is a comprehensive introduction to the
post-colonial novel in English. The book also elaborates how the city is used by the
novelists as both a site and a symbol for a range of obsessions and fears about post-colonial
society.

Frances Causer juxtaposes two very different works of fiction in “Comparing
Images of Exploitation in the Cities of Nairobi and Tokyo: Meja Mwangi’s Going Down
River Road and Takako Nakamoto’s The Female Bell Cricket” (2003). It considers the
powerful influence of urbanization in the city of Nairobi. The article also discusses the
detrimental influence urbanization has on Mwangi’s characters.

Ayo Kehinde’s academic essay “Post-independence Disillusionment in
Contemporary African Fiction: The Example of Meja Mwangi’s Kill Me Quick” (2004),
makes an effort to examine Mwangi’s views about the plight of the masses in neo-colonial
African societies as reflected in his fiction. This essay attempts to examine the discourse of
postcolonial decadence in contemporary African fiction. Kill Me Quick, is explored in the
essay with a view to highlight how Mwangi has contributed to the discourse of the motifs
of pains and disillusionment in the postcolonial African novel. The primary focus of the paper “An Aesthetics of Realism: The Image of Postcolonial Africa in Meja Mwangi’s *Going Down River Road*” (2005), by Ayobami Kehinde is to uncover the manner in which the social and economic realities in the real world of postcolonial Kenya are represented in Meja Mwangi’s *Going Down River Road*.

Another essay “Juvenile Delinquency and Violence in the Fiction of Three Kenyan Writers” (2007), by Tom Odhiambo is a preliminary examination of crime and violence in postcolonial Kenyan fiction. It examines how Meja Mwangi has dealt with the themes of crime and violence in his works. The article postulates that the prevalence of juvenile delinquency and the related acts of violence in his works could be read as indicators of the failure of the postcolonial state to include urban youth in the mainstream of society. The struggle over resources that is depicted in the fiction of Meja Mwangi may be fictive, but it closely mirrors the state of affairs in contemporary Kenya and consequently to relocate the text within its historical and ideological context.

“*The Quest for Social Justice in Meja Mwangi’s The Cockroach Dance*” (2013) is an essay by Francis Etse` Awitor which probes deep into the exploitation and dissonance of the African society. This essay specifically focuses on the quest and revolt of the main protagonist of the novel, Dusman. Dusman’s stand to redeem the society against the misery of the perpetual victims of the “Lords” of their society is pointed out in this essay.

One of the common strains running through the corpus of Armah and Mwangi is the tone of melancholia in the political action in the aftermath of gaining independence. One could discern their revolutionary allegiances in the contemplation of the depraved world in their fictional narrative. Their texts manifest the attempt to carve out a destiny independent of the corrosive influences of white contact. Their obligation to the cause of the subjugated races starts from their portrayal of Ghana as well as Kenya’s recent emancipation which was straight led to sterility.

The disaffection of Armah and Mwangi with the aftermath of independence is rightly put forward by Armah in his article “African Socialism: Utopian and Scientific”: 
As the Algerian revolutionaries have so sarcastically noted, the African politicians love flashy scenes and high-falutin’ words. That is only a partial exploration. More important is the historical fact that in a very radical sense the nationalist leaders of Africa have found themselves sucked into the role of hypocrites, actors involved in a make-believe situation. (28)

Revolutionary fervour in Africa guttered into political betrayal. The regime that gained authority after independence dwindled internally to a corrupt cabal. These writings assert the colonisation of the mind, cultural colonisation, which proves to be the most deadly legacy of colonialism. The convergence of ideas in the works of both the writers is a pointer to the hypocrisy of the political elite of the country.

One pertinent point of great relevance to Armah and Mwangi’s writing is the constant visualization of the tension in the contemporary scene. The works of both of them are laced with ideas and issues of relevance in the neo-colonial conflicted society; where the luscious goods of the western world seem highlighted by the neon ‘gleam’ of commercialised romance. With unwavering conviction they write about the struggle between the native genius of a people trying to assert their cultural integrity, and the forces, usually internalized, which would divert it into alien channels.

The crosscurrents of ideas and concerns running through the writings of Armah and Mwangi do not paint Africa in a glamorized perspective, instead they deal with problems of greater urgency. The writers highlight how the phony independence is intensifying the problems instead of ending them. Ghana and Kenya, after attaining the political independence, went through the same experience where corruption became pervasive. The acquisitive instinct of bourgeoisie substantiated that the structures that facilitated colonial subjugation and perpetuated it were left intact and fortified, infected by European materialism. The leaders of both the nations simply slipped on the robes of their European predecessors. They emerged as the new colonialists, wallowing in sumptuous life-style; the leaders became wild in their drive to acquire the luxury goods of Europe. Amidst the mass squalor and poverty, the leaders ran away from the responsibility of good governance and instead used ideology as cover for their
materialistic ways. Analysing the antics of the post-independence African leadership, Armah and Mwangi instantly and emphatically refused to be taken in by all the show. They knew all along that all the slogans and all the pomp and all the torrents of words were at bottom only an illusionist’s art. Both the writers have used their pen to bring to the fore the African woes.

Armah, in his novels describes the plight of newly independent Ghana, longing to shed its colonial legacy while at the same time unsure of which path to follow that might lead it to progress and prosperity. Mwangi also portrays how Africans were pushed to their limits, and after attaining freedom they are still tangled and grappling against those very forces which have left their geographical boundaries but continue to exert their influence indirectly. The colonial masters strategize and evolve ways to suit their subversive purposes. African people are tethered to their erstwhile colonial masters whose souls and minds are found fettered and shackled in the dark dungeons of alienation. Armah and Mwangi in their novels portray things as they are, brutal and unrelenting, and at the same time try to provide an optimistic solution to the neo-colonial problem.

The age of independence also witnessed the emergence of social classes and class contradictions, a development that disappointed and shocked many African writers, and created artistic works expressing disillusionment with post-colonial African society. As summarized S. Nyamfukudza of Armah’s early works that “Bereft of any sense of community or direction, the educated élites and the masses are shown as actively engaged in their own betrayal, collaborating in the neo-colonial plunder and impoverishment of their national heritages,” (362). At this time, writers therefore saw their role as that of transforming society and its leaders by means of moral enlightenment. The works of this period thus subscribed a liberal humanist ideology that pleaded with the oppressed. The post-colonial writers delegate the revolutionary vanguard role to the ordinary people. The authors were implicitly dissatisfied with the elite and bestowed their faith in the common man to solve Africa’s contradictions. Armah and Mwangi’s novels clearly reflect this. Both write and spare no effort to furnish answers to the misfortunes of colonial subjugation and enslavement of black people.
Mwangi and Armah have graphically sketched their characters with gusto and zest. Some of their characters also reflect an engrossing hunger for material comforts, a covetous mania which deter them to cater to deeper spiritual needs except their persecuted protagonists. It would not be wrong to interpret the lust for wealth, the material dependence on the capitalist West, undermining the solidarity of people and which leads to sterility. They bring them to life with embodiments of values they would like to see. What one gets is one of the fullest, the most diverse and the most memorable tableaux of men and women in African fiction.

It would not be irrelevant here to mention the question popped up by the trinity of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin for better comprehension of the works of Armah and Mwangi. They raised the question “Why should postcolonial societies continue to engage with the imperial experience?” (Empire Writes Back 6). They further enquired “since all the postcolonial societies we discuss have achieved political independence,” then “why is the issue of coloniality still relevant at all?” (Empire Writes Back 6). One of the causes that Armah and Mwangi in their writing explicate as to why “the empire still needs to write back to the centre once the imperial structure has been dismantled in political terms” (Empire Writes Back 6-7) is that in spite of the independence granted by the colonisers, the centre still exerts economic and cultural control on most of the colonised regions. The pseudo-freedom has not resulted in bringing about a dialogue of equality between the colonised people and their colonisers. They insist that political freedom has proved to be a nominal freedom. While during colonialism the Africans were culturally degenerated, physically and mentally displaced and economically manipulated, political independence could not re-institute their pre-colonial dominion. Writing, therefore, for post-colonial regions was employed to reinstall their supremacy in the colonised people’s uninterrupted hunt for self-valorization, self-regeneration and fecundation.

Kenyans celebrated Uhuru (freedom) in 1963 but the British suzerainty was to change the character of the country forever even after it became an independent nation. The choice of gearing the country’s political and economic development towards western capitalist path, coupled with the stand of those who had teamed up with the colonisers to oppose the struggle for independence might account for the continued dependence on
foreign aid to balance the nation’s budget. This in the end can be seen as an impediment to the development of a national consciousness. Foreign investments and private enterprise were advocated to bring prosperity and development to Kenya. It clearly demonstrated that the inherited colonial or economic structure was left intact and the term used for it was “Africanization.” Considerable amount of foreign investments were done, a large number of multinational corporations cropped up controlling the manufacture of things of all sorts. Government invested in important sectors and bourgeoisie took a firm grip on bureaucracy, business and politics. Multinational culture benefited only the small minority but best suited the acquisitive instinct of bourgeoisie. The gap between haves and have-nots increased and population growth forced the crowd to migrate from rural areas to urban centres looking for better prospects.

In 1970s and 1980s the political climate in post-independent Ghana and Kenya had grown more regressive. The novels are acted upon by these irresolvable social circumstances. The duo’s texts are populated with underlying social contradictions in a neo-colonial society. Mwangi and Armah try to unmask the repression of the neo-colonial set up in their discourse.

The writings of Armah and Mwangi clearly highlight how even after fifty years of independence, the continent’s situation is not better because the former colonial powers are joined by new emerging powers such as the United States of America, erstwhile Soviet Union and China. Documenting the existence of continuation of external indirect control in Africa, Kwame Nkrumah in his book *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, popularized the term ‘neo-colonialism.’ With the appearance of this book international attention was drawn to the fact that the achievement of national sovereignty had not brought any change in colonial relations. Kwame Nkrumah reiterated that “the essence of neo-colonialism is that the state which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside” (*Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* 1). In both *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* and *Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare* (1968) he defines neo-colonialism as the use of economic power to control the political fortunes of independent African States, while Africans
maintained a semblance of independence. Nkrumah argued that the exploitative world economic system and Africa’s dependence on the world commodity market and international financial management and technology as a source of economic development would rob African states of the power to make their own decisions. Since a neo-colonial country is the one that has all the outward trappings of independence, but whose major policies are in reality controlled from outside. Nkrumah was acutely conscious of the pervasiveness of neo-colonialism and why it was impossible for any African country to avoid it completely.

The concept owes inter-textual references to Marxist and Leninist thinking. Prognostications of Marx of capitalism as a stage in the socio-economic development of the human society are relevant for the socio-economic philosophy in contemporary times. Marx’s critique of capitalism, economic basis structuring the society, legal and political superstructures and definite form of social consciousness is part of the socio-economic philosophy today also. In contemporary literary theory, neo-colonialism is generally defined as a tendency of erstwhile colonised nations to depend upon their previous masters for financial and technological assistance, thereby implying another mode of colonisation that extends beyond physical restraints. Apart from economic dependence, it also implies cultural dominance of earlier colonial powers over the native culture of the newly independent nations, thus fostering a new age of colonial control that is even more difficult to overthrow than the earlier military control, for the barriers that now hold the infant nations are invisible, and impossible to fathom, let alone break free from them.

Neo-colonialism holds within itself the tripartite modus operandi of the previous imperial powers on the affairs of the newly independent nations. This includes cultural, social and economic influence on their internal matters as well as encroachment on the sovereignty of these nations, such as extending jurisdiction on matters such as foreign policy and coalescing support on international platforms such as the UN. This indirect intervention is difficult to identify and oppose, as it is so much deeply embedded in the social and political structure of the erstwhile colonised nations. Neo-colonial theory dictates that the previous imperialist government is merely replaced by a corresponding native oppressive regime, and thus the situation at the ground level for the common people
remains much the same.

On the one hand, the liberation from alien rule contrives to provide a second chance to the people to rejuvenate their nation and bring forth an era of self-government and with it a just and fair rule of law. But on the other hand, prolonged subjugation to imperialistic forces has cemented the exploitative system that the colonisers put in place to safeguard their political and economic interests and at the same time maximize the utilization of their human capital. The system has become so rigid that decades after the coloniser’s departure, the country is unable to shed off its colonial heritage and move forward into a new age of open and free for all government based on democratic principles. Though these nations have earned their freedom after bitter struggles and after making countless sacrifices and though the freedom was earned after dreams had been concocted of welfare states and exponential progress, still the nations are so plagued by their past that they are unable to look forward to the future. They are caught in a time warp, just moving along in circles, without any hope of amendment or amelioration.

Neo-colonialism extensively shows that every aspect of the ex-colonised nations still harbours colonial influences despite achieving independence. Capitalism, neo-liberal globalization and cultural subjugation are reinforced on the former colonies by the colonial masters for the economic, political, ideological, cultural and military benefits for their home states. There are different mechanisms operated by neo-colonists to retain their erstwhile colonies in the chain of bondage and tyranny. The territorial colonialism faded away but effective methods were enacted to ensure dependence of developing nation on the imperialist forces. Kwame Nkrumah exploring the divergent neo-colonial strategies writes:

The methods and form of this direction can take various shapes. For example, in an extreme case the troops of the imperial power may garrison the territory of the neo-colonial State and control the government of it. More often, however, neo-colonialist control is exercised through economic or monetary means. The neo-colonial state may be obliged to take the manufactured products of the imperialist power to the exclusion of competing products from elsewhere. Control over government policy in the neo-colonial State may be secured by payments towards the cost of running
the State, by the provision of civil servants in positions where they can
dictate policy, and by monetary control over foreign exchange through the
imposition of a banking system controlled by the imperial power.

(*Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* ix-x)

Apart from it varied cultural and educational influences are embraced so that erstwhile
masters still have a hand dipped in old colonies.

It is clear that although it might seem that the colonizing nations have freed the
colonised nations from the chain of bondage and tyranny, but still imperialism has not
ended. The imperialist forces have merely changed their methods and these methods are
modern attempts to perpetuate colonialism. One of the effective methods is economic
imperialism wherein colonial trade patterns are tried to be maintained. It is done by
determining import and export prices, import and export quantities, provision of providing
favourable treatment to imperial companies and their monopolistic access in erstwhile
colonies. Apart from these they take the liberty of legal infractions.

International organizations like IMF, World Bank and WTO have institutionalized a
new model of imperialism. These organizations, under the pretext of economic support,
maintain and increase indebtedness. The loans or investment done by these institutions in
developing countries is another mechanism to gain control over the domestic affairs or
economic affairs of the developing countries. Elaborating on it Harold Nayikal points out:

[A]ppointing the World Bank/IMF, which was run by countries that were
unwilling to give up their colonial mercantile practices in Africa in the first
place, to be the watchdog spelled a big conflict of interest. It is no surprise
that the IMF/ World Bank policies have driven Africa deeper into debt and
poverty, while the western economies still benefit enormously from African
production and markets. (15)

According to Nkrumah, under a more cosmetic name, aid is just another means to
exploit developing nations. The neo-colonised nations become an easy prey because the
developed nations need resources like gas, petroleum, etc. and the developing nations
require funds to change their condition.
These organizations also try to maintain the neo-colonial control by enacting the policy of Structural Adjustment Plan which is modelled on the neo-liberal ideology, a combination of free market policies. These policies have become the requisite to gain loan from these institutions. The privatization of government-held enterprises, liberalization of trade and money market, currency devaluation measures, higher interest rates to attract saving and foreign investment and de-regulation of markets are policies under this programme. And these policies in return result in “massive repatriation of income, dumping of cheap products, devaluation of currency and inflated prices of commodities” (Nayikal 8-11)

The other effective method through which the neo-colonialist powers administer the neo-colonised countries is through political control. The neo-colonised powers appoint their own civil servants or manipulate the election in favour of their candidate so that they can install a favourable administration. They also use the option of bribing the local politicians to direct policy in their favour. The puppet governments are teleguided marionettes of the neo-colonialists. Neo-colonialists finance the government and also support political coups. This is done so that the domestic policies do not interfere with the neo-colonial institutions which are managing neo-colonised nation’s economic and natural resources. Political affairs are used lopsidedly by the dominant power to subtly compel the dominant sectors of the dominated society to do its bidding.

The practices known to the colonial era are granted continuity through various policies, and one of them is Western education. The relentless efforts of European powers resulted in making Western education also as a valuable instrument of effective colonisation and pacification of Africa. Under colonial rule, Western education system helped in creating a class of privileged elitist few who would occupy various administrative positions. The nature of colonialism resulted in the denigration and disruption of the African traditional cultures and systems of education to make way for Western education and European civilisation. Thus, the type of education provided for the masses was for psychological and cultural assimilation with the West. Western education is still pursuing these aims in the neo-colonial era.
The advance method of domination is perpetuated very easily by cultural hegemony whereby the mind of the neo-colonised people is vitiated. With the collapse of colonial empires and transition into neo-colonialism, the ex-colonies’ cultural fabric registered shifts and changes. Cultural dominance today includes sports, medicine, religious missions, and the world wide proliferation of the culture machines, that is, a state’s mass media. These practices are not resented by the recipient culture. By exporting their culture in its most appealing form to other nations, countries around the world are making good use of the “ability to obtain the outcomes they want through attraction rather than coercion or payment”-an ability otherwise known as soft power (Nye 94). The biggest achievement of the imperial powers through cultural hegemony is to force the Africans to see their past, their national heritage and their national culture as one wasteland. Viewing this wasteland of non-achievement “makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples’ languages rather than their own” (Ngugi, Decolonising the Mind 3). Elaborating it further, Ngugi writes:

It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death wish. (Decolonising the Mind 3)

So, the continent’s underdevelopment and its structural dependence on the western hemisphere in the contemporary age of globalization can be attributed to neo-colonialism.

The core theoretical framework of the thesis is based on the analysis of neo-colonial theory as put forward by Nkrumah. In addition to Nkrumah’s theory, the critical procedure of this study is also derived from the sociologically mediated criticism of Emmanuel Obiechina, Abiola Irele, and the Ibandan school of dialectical historicism, that is, the predication of literature and criticism on socio-historical reality wherein the realities in question are African cultural realities. Abiola Irele’s interpretation of a ‘sociological imagination’ in The African Experience in Literature and Ideology (1981) is of an approach that is sociological in imagination, which attempts, in Irele’s words, to;
Correlate the work to the social background to see how the author’s intention and attitude arise out of the wider social context of his art in the first place, and, more important still, to get to an understanding of how each writer, or each group of writers, captures a moment of the historical consciousness of the society. (34)

As Stephen Clingman in *History from the Inside* (1986) suggests, “If you want to know what life was to [Tolstoy] interpreting historical events in *War and Peace*, you must understand the interpretation historically” (2). A material–historical perspective will pose certain fundamental questions, such as;

a) What were the socio political conditions responsible for the changes in consciousness?

b) How have those conditions and contradictions been reflected, for example, in Armah and Mwangi’s novels?

c) What are the other contributing factors to literary production, such as audience, language and other underlying traditions?

In other words, there will be an attempt to draw out the link between the dominant ideology and the aesthetic ideology expressed in terms of literary values, goals and methods.

Armah’s recommendation that the critic must be equipped with sufficient reading to “clarify the interconnectedness of the economics of continents, the politics of nations and the sociology and culture of the people” (“One Writer’s Education” 1753), suggests that only a multi–disciplinary holistic background reading will allow for a better comprehension of the link between socio-economical conditions and literary production. A cultural ontology different from that of the West governs the relationship of art to society in the African context and traditional conceptions of functional and committed art cannot be excluded from any attempt to critically evaluate the act of writing specifically employed as a narrative of liberation. African intellectuals in the post-colonial period believe, as Charles Angmor puts it, that they cannot “afford the luxury of literature as a
recondite art” (182). The study would, thus, involve an analysis of the literary environment in which Armah and Mwangi’s writing has taken shape.

The present study, however, is not concerned with an analysis of literature in formal terms, but rather, with an examination of the inter-relationship between literary creativity and the real world. One means of comprehending this relationship between the formal product and the formation process is to undertake a socio-historic perspective of the literary environment in which the texts have been produced. The selected novels, *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* and *Two Thousand Seasons* of Armah, and *Kill Me Quick, Going Down River Road* and *The Cockroach Dance* of Mwangi would, thus, be considered on the basis of their polemical dimensions and the extent to which the experience of neo-colonialism dominates the basic paradigm of Armah and Mwangi’s fiction.