TERRORISM AND THE NEW IMPERIALISTS: AN ANALYSIS OF MEJA MWANGI'S *THE BUSHTRACKERS*.

by

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Abstract:
The critic, Eustace Palmer, divides literary tradition in Africa into two streams, in regard to the novel. He claims that the first stream is pioneered by Chinua Achebe and has its preoccupation with African rural life, while the second stream is pioneered by Cyprian Ekwensi and its concern is with life in the urban areas. In this second stream exists a "second generation" writer from Kenya, Meja Mwangi, who follows in the footsteps of Ekwensi in his depiction of the moral, economic and political circumstances peculiar to life in the metropolis.

This essay attempts to analyse one of Mwangi's less celebrated novels, *The Bushtrackers*, in order to ascertain the author's opinion on terrorist activity in contemporary Africa. Two of Mwangi's former works, *Carcass for Hounds* and *A Taste of Death*, are known for their bias in favour of terrorism during the colonial period, but *The Bushtrackers* is exceptional in that its statement is relevant to the 21st century. Through analogy, the novel demonstrates that imperialism is still alive, albeit in a different guise, and that as such violent counter-reactions by the "colonized" cannot be ruled out. Notwithstanding, it concludes that the effective solution to this new imperialism is not necessarily in lynching the foreigner, but in Africa's willingness to face squarely its own social and political failings.

INTRODUCTION

A lucid and impartial definition of terrorism is supplied by the sociologists. Calhoun el at in their book, *Sociology*. According to Calhoun and his team, terrorism is simply "the spread of terror" (429). Most other definitions are less objective, depending on whether those defining the term are sympathetic or unsympathetic towards this controversial method of social reform. For instance, Calhoun et al themselves provide an alternative definition which implies sympathy: "[Terrorism] is a form of social action... a response to social-structured conditions, such as those that exist when people who consider themselves a national group lack a state to represent them" (429). In contrast, the definition given in *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics* underscores the frequent antagonism that terrorism inspires: "[The term is] almost invariably used in a pejorative sense to describe life-threatening actions perpetrated by politically-motivated self-appointed sub-state groups" (492). Whether one prefers Calhoun's definition or the definition of the Oxford researchers, it is evident that terrorist activity is more than just violence. It is a calculated political strategy with a calculated target. More pertinently, it has become an inescapable part of life in the twenty-first century: the Madrid Conference on Terrorism held two months ago, marking the first anniversary of the train bombings in the Spanish capital and an attended by two dozen prime ministers, and heads of state from across the globe, established this fact beyond reasonable doubt. Moreover, the conference x-rayed a critical element in the discussion on terrorism, which is the

problem of banning terrorism and at the same time upholding human rights. As Calhoun has discerned, some forms of terrorism are occasioned by social oppression.

Like all other nations, Africa has not been exempted from terrorism, and it is therefore no surprise that the African novelist, the "teacher" (Achebe, qtd in Ojinnah 4), has something to say about it. This essay concentrates on the thoughts of a single Kenyan, Meja Mwangi - in his novel The Bushtrackers (TB). The Bushtrackers features a hero who turns terrorist and concludes with an implicit vindication of his tactics. Such vindications are not uncommon to Mwangi. His first two novels Carcase for Hounds and A Taste of Death, were tributes to the Mau Mau uprisings. Such vindications are not even uncommon to African writers.

A case in point is a fellow Kenyan, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, who is probably the best-known pro-terrorist novelist in sub-Saharan Africa. More recently, Wole Soyinka joined the camp, judging from his posture in his second novel, Season of Anomy, and his latest autobiography, Ibadan. Consequently, The Bushtrackers cannot claim to be alone in its terrorist inclinations. Notwithstanding, no other novel readily comes to mind that treats with such subtlety and humour an issue that is, in effect, tragic. And in the process, no other novel touches so curiously on another inescapable reality of the twenty-first century, which is the noiseless but continued management of the African nations (and the coloured nations as a whole) by Europe and America. With wit and candour, Mwangi presents the two sides of terrorism - the politically motivated life-threatening action as well as the response to social-structured conditions by people who feel they lack adequate representation - and in so doing he alights on the very crisis between violence and human rights, which is at the heart of the debate on terrorism today.

Meja Mwangi has, with justification been described as "one of the most exciting of [the] new East African writers" (Palmer 105). He has attracted much critical attention on account of his earlier works, Kill Me Quick and Going Down River Road, but reviewers have remained comparatively reticent on The Bushtrackers. For example, the above-mentioned Palmer has produced some scholarly work on Mwangi's first set of publications but apparently never proceeded to write on The Bushtrackers. In a general critique on Mwangi, Palmer notes a trait that follows the author into later life; namely, that "the analysis of the social realities in the new African urban aggregates... is one of [his] major preoccupations" (105). Palmer thereby sites Mwangi among African writers with an urban rather than a rural focus. Palmer notes further the most striking characteristic, perhaps, of Mwangi's art, which is his "touching compassion for the social or political underdog, a quietness of tone which emphasizes rather than obscures the very serious problems being analysed" (105).

Elizabeth Knight is among the few reviewers to specifically discuss *The Bushtrackers*. In line with Palmer, she begins her discussion with a favourable assessment of Mwangi's position in relation to his colleagues: "With his distinctive prose style he is easily the most outstanding writer in English in Kenya today" (156). Part of his distinction she attributes to his ability to write satisfactorily for both students of literature and casual readers. She takes *The Bushtrackers* as an

object lesson, remarking that it is "a venture into popular fiction" (156) and so violates some of the expectations of language and plot that govern the regular approved school text. Irrespective of this Knight claims that it "works very well, making Meja Mwangi one of the very few East African writers who can write successfully for the English-reading popular market" (156).

It could be the novel's nonconformist status as a work of popular fiction that has led to its neglect by the critics. Despite the fact that it was written some years back and treats issues of international concern, nothing has so far been documented on its exposition of either terrorist activity or oblique Western control of the third world. The work may be imaginary but it contains its own truths. The aim of this essay is therefore to examine terrorism in *The Bushtrackers*, first by looking at the socially-structured conditions that foster it and second by looking at it as a form of response, in order to uncover Mwangi's statement on the role of violent political operations in modern Africa and the new imperialism.

SOCIALLY-STRUCTURED CONDITIONS

In the opening pages of the novel, the author makes it plain that his chosen society is not restricted to that of the orthodox, unassuming Kenyan citizen. It incorporates the Kenyan bandit, and the reader is plunged headlong into intrigues over the shipment of Indian hemp and deadly battles between accomplished criminals and government's struggling security forces. A number of characters immediately register their presence in the drama. The first is Al Haji, the international smuggler and drug baron who directs a multi-million-dollar poaching organization. He is aided and abetted by an impressive company of gunmen, including the Italian cop-killer, Ricardo, and a local thug known as Kuria. Valiantly resisting these bandits is the long arm of the law, represented chiefly by a modest two-man partnership of forest-rangers, popularly known as "bushtrackers". One bushtracker, John Kimathi, is a black man, and the other Frank Burkell is his white friend.

The conflict in the narrative is generated by these two unequally-matched groups

> ... Al Haji with his American sponsorship and criminal authority, and the two inauspicious bushtrackers. Mwangi turns Al Haji's aggression into an analogy for the intrusion of a global superpower into the affairs of a young under-developed state, and as he shows, the violence of the latter is no more than a response.
> A peculiarity that quickly emerges about the social structure in the novel is its influential foreign sector. This sector comprises white settlers who are hardly mentioned apart from the humble Frank - and hundreds of tourists who flock into the land annually, providing Kenya with its main source of revenue. More than anything else, however, the foreign influence is summed up in the person of one individual, Al Haji, a complex man indeed. He is an African-American who, after multiple changes of identity, finally naturalized as a Kenyan citizen. He is a metaphor for Western infiltration at its most cunning. He is "a ruthless bastard" (BT 149), in the words of an embittered acquaintance. In a nutshell Al Haji is an outlaw, and his life of felony did not begin in Nairobi. In New York, six years prior to the happenings in the novel, he

was the object of a man-hunt and managed to escape from the States "only half an hour ahead of the FBI agents who wanted him in connection with several offences" (7). Landing on Africa's shores, he traversed the peninsula by air, land and river, eventually terminating in Nairobi after months of tortuous journeying. His "homecoming" became immortalized in his name; Mwangi describes the entire ordeal in this amusing fashion: "After months of numerous hardships in the various African climates, he had arrived in Nairobi, thin and foot-weary. In memory of his pain-filled pilgrimage through the cruel motherland, he had changed his name to Al Haji, meaning 'The Pilgrim' in Swahili" (58). Thus, it is established from the outset that Al Haji is a stranger.

A second peculiarity of the society which emerges in the novel is the impact of foreign currency upon the settlers and indigenes. They have an undue reverence for dollars and pounds sterling, it seems, which makes smooth Al Haji's operations. When Al Haji initially arrives Nairobi, he links up with the resident crooks, but he lives in obscurity, relatively speaking, until his old mentors in the States come to his rescue. They are an Italian Mafia family known as the Delories, and their funds provide Al Haji with the coverage he needs to appear respectable while quietly working in their joint interests. The Delories purchase a six-hundred-acre plot of land and build Al Haji a ten-bedroom mansion, complete with an Olympic-size swimming pool, a golf course, an orange plantation and two trout streams. From this sanctuary he runs an import-export business which is generally conceded to be shady, even though nobody seems to care on the home front. A section of Nairobi's European community, for example is said to "[know] Al Haji well, and... to have had some dubious dealings with him at one time or another" (149).

The African community equally knows him. Aside from the "high-ranking government officials and business associates" (7) that he entertains at his residence, Orange Estate, his regular guests are "corrupt customs officers, law enforcement agents and quite a few members of parliament" (8). This is Mwangi's inaugural remark on contemporary African society. Before the first few chapters close, the reader has become conversant with Al Haji's duties as the official representative in East Africa of the Delorie "empire" (9). His number one assignment is poaching, and in consequence he remorselessly depletes the game reserves. Al Haji's dealings should not be underestimated; he is an extortioner who has his finger on the nation's financial pulse. In one brief but vivid scene, the reader is presented with a picture of an elephant that has fallen prey to his men. The sophisticated machine guns the men used are from Al Haji's personal stock, and the scene says all that needs to be said both about the ex-fugitive's attitude to his adopted country and the treachery of certain African indigenes: The elephant, a healthy forty-year old cow, had been shot neatly through the heart with a high-powered rifle and her tusks cruelly dug out of her puzzled face with sharp axes. There was no blood except around the bloody stumps left on the sides of the cow's mouth. [Kimathi

and Frank] stood silently and looked at the carcass, weighed down by the sense of utter hopelessness that accompanied such sights.... "She was pregnant," Kimathi said, going round the huge carcass. (84) It is difficult to estimate the full extent of the damage done by Al Haji. He reduces elephants to ivory for the Chinese, leopards and tigers to skins for clothing European ladies, and the grassland to "special African marijuana" (155) for eager New Yorkers.

The novel records that many bushtrackers die in combat with his men. Much later in the novel, his Italian aide, Ricardo, carelessly burns down thousands of hectares of parkland in his attempt to wipe out an anti-poaching squad. While stressing Al Haji's misdeeds, the author wants the reader to be conscious of the fact that this character is not working in isolation. He is the ambassador of an empire. In this event it is the Delorie empire, but it follows the precedence set by other empires all the same. The areas of control stretch across Africa and Asia, and a principal objective is the flow of materials out of Africa and into the nation of the imperial parent or beyond. Since the "parents" involved here are criminals, their traffic is approximately criminal: "Marijuana... ivory... diamonds smuggled from Tanzania...stolen cars... smuggled textiles... illegal firearms and, especially in Nairobi where corruption was a way of life... crooked property speculations" (58). It is imperialism in a new dimension.

The reader can better appreciate the situation by deliberating on a comment made by the protagonist of a novel by Peter Abrahams. The novel is entitled *The View from Coyaba* and the protagonist's name is 'David. His comment is with respect to a new mode of colonialism that has become the trend in the latter half of the twentieth century. David argues that this is "the age... not of direct conquest, but of what they [call] covert operations, and destabilization and disinformation; the true hand, now, [is] hidden" (The View from Coyaba 321). In other words, the contemporary era is that of the hidden conqueror: the discreet powers behind "undemocratic institutions"; e.g. the World Bank, the UN and the IMF, according to another African novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah (Osiris Rising 117).

A literary critic, Udenta Udenta, alludes to these powers as the forces of "re-colonization". Udenta explains it as follows: "Re-colonization is a process whereby the erstwhile colonial powers... decide to cement and make permanent the structures and institutions through which colonialism was successful in the first place" (163). The instruments of the re-colonizer he lists as "high finance capital" and "heightened foreign participation" in economic enterprises - - in a word; money. Obviously, the mechanism of re-colonization allows for the silent persistence of First World domination, which is the reality being parodied in The Bushtrackers.

In the narrative, in line with the actual trend at present, a profoundly crafty game of politics is being played, with the Delories pulling the strings of power from distant America. In the interim their man in Africa decides to pull a few strings of his own. This leads us to the last detail to note about the social structure of the novel, which is that the terrorism starts from the summit. In fact a considerable degree of the overall confusion in Kenya is spearheaded by power-brokers outside its borders. Illustrative of this are the deadly skirmishes in the game reserves, which are the direct

result of the Mafia's meddling. Again, Al Haji's "taxation", to be reviewed in the ensuing sub-section, is the definitive example of "politically-motivated life threatening action", and sparks off an unprecedented outbreak of violence in Nairobi metropolis.

TERRORIST RESPONSE

In the opening paragraph of this essay, among other things terrorism was defined as "a response" to given conditions by people who "lack a state to represent them". This is a synopsis of Kimathi's plight when he is eventually faced with Al Haji's taxation. Al Haji and his gangsters are transparently oppressive. Regardless of this, government is reluctant to screen one of the country's top personages; the police is incompetent to check him and the law courts are poised to defend him. He enjoys a sort of "diplomatic immunity" emanating from the combined moral laxity of the native authorities and the bulk of the populace.

Tension mounts as the criminal power-play gathers momentum. Al Haji wants to expand his coasts, and this demands huge amounts of money. Accordingly, once he discerns that Nairobi is conducive for corrupt practices, he organizes a protection racket to "tax" its small-scale businessmen. Kuria, alias "Scarface", is the leader of the gang commissioned to extort money from the shop-keepers, originally on a monthly basis but invariably on a weekly basis. The rationale for the collection, ironically, is protection from hoodlums. The racketeers move by night, in a small group and armed with daggers and pistols. Their manner of extraction includes beatings, maiming, raids and arson and later on rape and murder.

In the passage coming shortly, the racketeers stop by at the shop of Uncle Eater, Kimathi's only surviving relative. Kimathi has recently married and retired from bushtracking, and it is his first experience of the tax. The passage is relevant not only because it lays open Al Haji's business methods but also because it exemplifies the typical rhetoric of popular fiction:

[Kimathi] turned to Scarface. 'Who are you?'

'We provide services,' the man answered.

'What sort of services?' Kimathi asked, when no more information was forthcoming.

Scarface smiled patiently.

'You mean...' Kimathi couldn't get the words out of his mouth. 'You guys have got a protection racket going?'

'This is a rough neighbourhood,' the man said, glancing from Uncle Eater back to Kimathi. "But no strong words, please. We prefer to call it a tax. People pay taxes to the government for education, health, roads. Why not for something more practical like personal security? Tax, not racket, mind you'.

'Tax, you son of a bitch?' Kimathi pushed forward and came face to face with a second automatic held by one of the henchmen.

'Relax,' the man said quietly. (100)

Kimathi pays up, like everybody else but it does not forestall the menace. The Kenyan authorities turn a blind eye, and in the interim - Scarface and his crew grow progressively more arrogant. One ill-fated day they visit Uncle Eater's shop in Kimathi's absence, rape Kimathi's pregnant wife, Sofia, and bludgeon his uncle on the head. Neither Sofia nor Uncle Eater survive the attack. Kimathi is left with nothing except the box of tools he used as a forest-ranger: "The trunk containing his war booty... [a] collection of hunting knives, clubs, bows and arrows" (BT 185). Frank adds a couple of AKS rifles and some magazines and the two-man team of old is ready for vengeance.

By the time Kimathi manages to rouse himself for action, the author makes a telling allegation. He says: "The time for caution was long gone" (185); the implication being that Kimathi waited too long before reacting. Both Kimathi and Frank are champion game-rangers and crack marksmen. The tactics they employ for Al Haji are purely an extension of the tactics they used in the bush, and had they been used much earlier, Al Haji's game would have been stopped mid-track. As things turn out, it is when the disaster is complete that Kimathi makes a move. Dressed in his abandoned ranger's uniform, with a bow in his hand and a quiver of poisoned arrows slung across his shoulder, he proceeds towards the haunt of the racketeers and, guerilla fashion, conceals himself in a darkened doorway. When the gang arrives it takes only one of his poisoned arrows to reverse the direction of the spread of terror. Kuria and his men, who minutes before were confidently raking in cash, "never [having] to wait for more than a minute" to collect (186), fire two wild shots into the air and fly before Kimathi like frightened chickens. They are adept with fire-arms but unprepared for such archaic weaponry. In panic they retreat to Kuria's flat where the real terror begins:

The arrow he had used was charged with a mixture of snake poison and potent roots of some wild killif shrubs. Shortly after their arrival at Kuria's flat, as they were deciding to call a doctor to extract the arrow stuck in [their comrade's] back, the victim went into violent convulsions. His eyes dilated. He started to swell and his skin turned green all over. They watched in horror as he gnashed his teeth, chewed his own tongue and foamed at the mouth, exuding a mixture of froth and blood. His hands dug into the floor till the finger-nails broke and bled. He thrashed on the floor like a dying crocodile and in three minutes he was dead.

For the next ten minutes, Kuria and his men sat and watched the grotesque figure on the floor, too terrified to move or talk (187).

Al Haji miscalculates in that he stubbornly sends his men out again the next night. The outing finishes with the two vigilantes, Frank and Kimathi, waylaying the men and forcing an entrance into Al Haji's sitting room. In the encounter, Al Haji, Ricardo and Kuria are killed. It is almost too easy. As soon as the decision is made to react with violence the enemy is defeated within hours.

Of course, Mwangi is not presuming that terrorist activity is always so straightforward. The idea underlying the novel is that certain conditions may make it unavoidable and that when it is availed of, it has its own advantages. This is not an extraordinary notion. It was publicized several years ago" by the radical psychologist from Martinique, Frantz Fanon, in his renowned expose on imperialism in Algeria, *The Wretched of the Earth*. It was re-echoed by the South African literary critic, Lewis Nkosi, in his book on imperialism in his homeland, *The Translated Heart*. Fanon and Nkosi are two voices among a multitude that advocate drastic measures to a foreign menace. Nkosi, for instance, insists that where there is no parity between assailants, as it was with the blacks and whites in South Africa, or in Mwangi's case the rangers and their American-backed antagonists, the victory .of the weaker party lies in "revolutionary terrorism" and "in-fighting in the nooks and crevices" (56). The fictional David clinches the matter when he reminds his audience that there can be no clear-cut battlefield in a liberation struggle: "The frontline is everywhere and nowhere" (The View from Coyaba, 295).

In effect, one of the truths that emerges from the novel is of prime concern in the real world at present, which is that terrorism may be a step towards safeguarding human rights rather than a threat to the same. There are instances where violent politics is plainly illegal, as with Al Haji's unorthodox collections. Accordingly, the NATO Secretary-General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, avowed in Spain: "I know for sure that when trains are being blown up in Madrid, when twin towers are demolished (in New York)... I have no hesitation to define what that is. That is terrorism" (qtd in Kirka). But the matter is not always so unambiguous, as the world well knows. "The issue has long been delicate," Kirka concedes, "because governments often use violence to accomplish goals - leading to charges of 'state terrorism' - and because one group's 'freedom fighter' or 'martyr' is another's 'terrorist'".

CONCLUSION

The novel cannot be said to have a happy ending, and this is the first conclusion that can be drawn from the author's exposition of terrorism. At best, it is a necessary evil. The casualties are many and the international kingpins emerge unscathed. Kimathi and Frank get rid of Al Haji and drive off (innocently) with a suitcase of money, but it is small compensation for the human losses and, more importantly, it has next to no effect on the offenders tucked safely away in the United States. In the age of indirect conquest and "covert operations", as David phrases it, eliminating the available culprits can bring but temporary relief.

Be that as it may, these are not the gravest problems that the novel raises. The worrying factor is that the Kenyan community remains at the end of the day as it was at the beginning, decadent and dollar-intoxicated, and there is nothing to indicate that it will repent. This means, in turn, that the framework for re-colonization is left in place. Corruption is the people's lifestyle, Mwangi

confesses. As long as this situation is unaltered, there are good chances that the Orange Estates on this continent, whether inside or outside the African novel, will continually be staffed by fresh delegations of Al Hajis.

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