

**THE TREATMENT OF THE THEME OF
HIV/AIDS IN THE LAST PLAGUE BY MEJA**

MWANGI

BY

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LAST AFRICANA COLLECTION

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DECLARATION

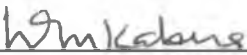
This is my original work and it has not been submitted for a degree in any other University.

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DEDICATION

To my nieces and nephews who share this ambition and to all those who are involved in quelling the HIV/AIDS pandemic, I Say,

It is dusk, but
take heart for
dawn is nigh.

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ABSTRACT

Underlying the perception of literature as an expression of human experiences is a subtle acknowledgement of some intricate relationship between reality and fiction. The role of a literary artist, Lukacs notes, is "to look at stark reality in the face." (95). Most likely then, it is for this reason that Onoge argues that artistic expressions are "the products of social praxis" (qtd in Gugelberger22).

This study operates on the conviction that in The Last Plague, Meja Mwangi strives to balance the demands of the literary art, social reality and moral purpose. The study--"The treatment 'of the theme of HIV/AIDS in Meja Mwangi's The Last Plague" --set out to look at the socio-economic impact of HIV/AIDS and how the scourge impacts differently on men and women. First, it situates Mwangi within the general literary mould as a committed writer capturing the plight of the lowly. It then proceeds to focus on The Last Plague and examine the literary artist's rendition of the objective reality that HIV/AIDS is.

Using the sociological approach to literary criticism as the dominant theoretical framework, the study reveals the societal misconceptions about the scourge that underlie its spread. It also shows how culture and ignorance, among other factors undermine individual as well as collective efforts aimed at combating the scourge.

The study therefore delineates Mwangi's moral values in the text especially in relation to the gender dynamics in society. It especially focuses on how the scourge ravages the

society socially, economically and psychologically. We discern, for instance, that this disease severs the cultural web that had hitherto bound this society. Janet's efforts emerge from the text as the unequivocal acceptance of a cause. We establish, however, that culturally entrenched view coupled with ignorance make hers a daunting task. The resolve with which she accomplishes this gigantic task is weighed against the depiction of her male counterparts'.

The study therefore discerns Mwangi's moral values as they are brought out in the text and extols Janet's heroism in the face of myriad obstacles. This study is no way exhaustive. Rather, it is aimed at exciting further critical excavation on the novel especially its stylistic correspondences: the subtle devices like symbolism, description and dialogue and how these engender the artist's perceptions into the readers' psyche.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Today, HIV/AIDS, is acknowledged as a global health crisis. The fear of AIDS has dominated the world's news headlines ever since the HIV virus was diagnosed almost twenty years ago. It is an illness, which weakens the body's immune system, following an attack by the HIV virus.

Though ways of controlling the disease, such as the use of condoms have been discovered and new therapies which can help prolong the life of AIDS victims developed, many people are still dying of the scourge around the world. According to the UNAIDS-2001 report, already 18.8 million people have died of AIDS, 3.8 of them being children. In 1999 alone, 5.4 million people were infected with the HIV virus, which has or will lead to full blown AIDS and ultimately to the death of the victims. In Kenya statistics indicate that 700 people die daily of the AIDS related diseases .It is also noted that 80% of the AIDS victims are in Africa.

AIDS is a disease, which is transmitted primarily through sex. Though the campaign mounted against AIDS has led to a greater awareness of modes of infection, and prevention, it has received different responses due to cultural factors. In Africa, for example, open discussion of sex is not socially approved and is believed to be synonymous with loose morals. One of the consequences is that many youngsters do not get sufficient sex education concerning their protection. Again, because sex is a taboo

subject, it becomes an activity that is shrouded in secrecy and for the young, something to be 'stolen' at the slightest opportunity even without protection.

The impact of HIV/AIDS today has been felt right from national to family level. Both the infected and affected have their own share of psychological and physiological problems to bear. The victims usually conjure images of the worst form of human suffering. Then there is the question of orphans who are left without basic social services and education. Often, when parents die or become too ill, children (especially girls) drop out of school, to take care of their young brothers and sisters. Consequently, young children of about ten years of age become defacto heads of families.

It is against this background that literary artists have expressed their feelings in different forms of literature -- poems, songs, plays, oral narratives, riddles, short stories, and novels -- to delineate the theme of HIV/AIDS. This study focuses on Meja Mwangi's novel: The Last Plague, which provides relevant material for the study of the theme of AIDS.

Statement of the Problem

Different writers have responded to this scourge by writing poems, plays, short stories and novels yet little attention has been paid to how writers have addressed the problem. In many societies, sex is a taboo subject that should not be discussed in public. It is for this reason that we need to see how writers who are the sensitive needles in society are dealing with the problem.

There is so much silence that surrounds the issues of HIV/AIDS. This needs to be broken. Most people living with HIV/AIDS are not free to talk about their condition since the general misconception is that the victims are people with loose morals. It is therefore necessary to see how literary writers today are trying to break the myths that surround the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Objectives

The Last Plague is a novel that has delineated the concept of HIV/AIDS. The aim of this study is to discuss the social economic impact of HIV/AIDS in society as depicted in Meja Mwangi's novel. The study also inquires into the differential impact of HIV/AIDS on gender relations. The project also intends to discuss HIV/AIDS and social integration.

Justification

All over the world, several people die daily. In Kenya, official statistics put the number of people dying of AIDS daily at five hundred to seven hundred. There is hardly any sexually active person who does not fear for his or her life. At the same time, the very old people fear the responsibility of taking care of orphans, while children fear losing their parents, their sisters and brothers. HIV/AIDS threatens human survival hence the need to study it from a literary perspective.

This study is also justified because it attempts to provide insights into how literature can be used to explain the pain and suffering of the people infected or affected by HIV/AIDS

and in so doing it enriches literature by providing some understanding of the struggles the victims undergo.

The study is further justified because it contributes to the ongoing struggle for the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Today, different institutions, organisations, disciplines worldwide have cast their torches towards this epidemic that is sweeping away the most energetic and productive people. Literature is not an exception. It creates awareness about the disease by arousing our empathies. It is also a fact that literature usually combines teaching and entertainment thus making it a more suitable means of addressing the theme of HIV/AIDS.

It is important to analyse the theme of HIV/AIDS because it revolves around behavioural change. It touches on the most sensitive aspects of people's culture such as male and female circumcision, and wife inheritance. The usual campaigns against these cultural practices that enhance the spread of the virus have brought a lot of conflict in many societies. Since literature draws its material from society, it is, therefore, necessary that such sensitive issues in life be handled from a literary point of view. Finally, this study fills the existing gap in the field of literature and HIV/AIDS.

Theoretical Framework

Sociological literary theory has been considered relevant for this study since the major concern of the study is to carry out a thematic interpretation of the novel. The theory advances the view that literature is a social institution within a cultural milieu. Rene

Wellek and Austin Warren are among the proponents of the sociological literary theory.

They hold the view that:

Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation. Such traditional literary devices as symbolism and metre are social in their very nature. Furthermore, literature 'represents' 'life', and 'life' is, in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary 'imitation'. The poet himself is a member of society, possessed of specific social status: he receives some degree of social recognition and reward; he addresses an audience, however hypothetical... Literature has also a social function, or 'use', which cannot be purely individual (94).

According to the standpoints of Warren and Wellek, literature only occurs in a social context. We can, therefore, deduce from their explanations that literature gains its raw materials from the daily experiences of society. The way people relate to one another in a community and to other people in different communities, their cultural practices, and belief systems are the source of literature.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o also holds the same view that literature is a product of society. He says that literature results from conscious acts of men and women in society. We can therefore infer that literature as Ngugi puts it does not spring from a vacuum. It gains its

impetus from society and therefore society is a well from which literature draws its source.

Meja Mwangi in his novel, The Last Plague does not put much emphasis on the personality or inner feelings of the characters as on the relations they have with each other and their environment. He does not allow his characters, who are HIV positive, to suffer so much as to arouse sympathy from the readers. His main focus is on what they do and how they relate with each other. A social interpretation of literature views these relations in terms of traditions and customs of society.

It is important for a work of literature to be placed within a social background and historical period because literature embodies the experiences of a people at a particular time. HIV/AIDS is a contemporary pandemic that has hit the world for the last two decades. The experiences we get in the novel are the current experiences that people are going through. Myths surrounding the disease and the various names given to it are socially constructed. It is a disease that affects the social relations of both men and women. Since the sociological literary theory asserts that literature represents life and it is a product of society, the theory is relevant in interpreting the theme of HIV/AIDS and society and on gender relations as depicted in The Last Plague.

However, literature is not only a product of society, but it is also a force in the society. Chris Wanjala in Season of Harvest argues that a writer as a useful citizen of the society should have a vision for change in his society. He continues to say that the alienation of

a writer will be expressed in his withdrawal from the values of what majority of his society stands for, in order to lay criticism with a view to creating a better social situation.

Wole Soyinka in his essay "The writer in modern Africa" asserts that the author must not contend himself with chronicling the customs of society. He must play the part of a bard and an oracle. To Soyinka, a writer must be visionary, a warning voice, and a builder of a future. These ideas will help us to interpret the lessons implied in Mwangi's novel.

A sociological literary approach also reflects the thoughts, feelings and customs of the age in which a work of art was written. It then follows that any relevant knowledge about the period a work of art was written will help a reader to understand and judge the relations within the characters. For the purpose of this study, relevant information on the impact of HIV/AIDS on society will be important in interpreting the text.

One might not be able to interpret the society of a literary work of art without having an idea of what the society was like in the period the work was being written. This is because the events in the novel are geared towards the experiences of the time. However, it is not just a question of works reflecting their time, what counts is what a writer makes of the thoughts, emotions and traditions of his or her age.

Mwangi is one of the writers who have responded creatively to this burning issue of HIV/AIDS. This is a disease that has fatal consequences with different theories and

myths surrounding it. A sociological literary approach is important in studying this novel:

The Last Plague.

Literature Review

This study revolves around the treatment of the theme of HIV/AIDS and society as depicted by Meja Mwangi in his novel, The Last Plague. Critical works on Mwangi's early works have been reviewed with the aim of identifying the existing gaps, which this study intends to fill, and also to reveal Meja Mwangi as a dynamic writer.

Amos Chebii in his BA dissertation entitled: 'Meja Mwangi: his development as a writer' analyses Mwangi's five novels: Kill Me Quick (1973), Carcase for Hounds (1974), Taste of Death (1975), Going Down River Road (1976), and The Bushtrackers (1979).

Chebii's major concern was to analyse Mwangi's development as a writer. To him Mwangi's novels are based on the Kenyan society. His two novels Kill Me Quick and Going Down River Road are based on the urban situation. He argues that Mwangi is a writer who has been responding to the changes in society with an amount of accuracy that portrays him as a writer who understands his society and the forces at play therein.

Thus, Chebii's aim was to show Meja Mwangi as a dynamic writer who understands and is able to articulate and to present vividly the past and the current problems of society. By the time Chebii was writing his dissertation, Mwangi had not published his later

works such as The Cockroach Dance, which is also an urban novel, Striving for the Wind (1990), and The Last Plague (2000).

Chebii's assertion that Meja Mwangi is a dynamic writer is true, because by the time he was studying Mwangi, the HIV virus had not been diagnosed in Kenya. His recent novel The Last Plague, which is at the centre of this study, is concerned with the effect of HIV/AIDS on society.

Simon Gikandi's BA dissertation: 'The growth of East African Novel' also deals with Mwangi's early works. He analyses Mwangi's perception of the worldview and how he depicts his characters. Gikandi says that the life of workers in Kill Me Quick and Going Down River Road is depicted realistically. He argues that Mwangi, in the two novels, deals with the construction worker, the hawker, the slum mechanic and the whore and uses ghastly images of death, rot and darkness to portray the desolation of his pitiful characters. His work does not touch on his latest novel, which deals with the contemporary pandemic hence a gap to be filled.

Joshua Teyie's BA dissertation entitled: 'Mwangi: The urbanization of a writer' analyses Mwangi as a writer and how he depicts the urban society. When Teyie was writing his thesis, the AIDS pandemic was not a threat to the society, and therefore, Meja Mwangi as a creative writer had not responded to it.

Angela Smith in her essay 'The novel in East Africa' says the following about Meja Mwangi:

Mwangi like Achebe requires a participating reader who recognises the implicit links in the novel and thinks about the significance of the books title. He uses the plot to embody the meaning as well as to create suspense, and he evokes the weather and landscape of Kenya so powerfully that they dominate and do not simply as Eustace Palmer claims reflect the characters moods and circumstances. The characters moods and circumstances are created to a large extent by place and weather. (Smith 18)

Angela finds Mwangi to be a very captivating writer. In fact, she says that there is no other African writer who captures the immediacy of the guerrilla situation as effectively as Mwangi does. Her main concentration is on Mwangi as a writer and she narrows down on only one novel: Carcase for Hounds to support her argument. She does not mention Mwangi's later novel The Last Plague.

Jacqueline Bardolph, in her essay: 'The literature of Kenya' argues that Meja Mwangi's first two novels are related in tone and subject to the literary production for this country. She points out that the first two novels are in the same vein of angry realism and are both documents and pamphlets (46). Kill Me Quick follows two uprooted adolescents, school-leavers barely surviving in the slum jungle of Nairobi. Taste of Death is a Mau-Mau novel that shows both sides of the conflict as doomed to suffer and loose. Mwangi takes up the same subject in Carcase for Hounds and moves further in fictionalizing history.

The narrative concentrates on the character of a rebel general, truly tragic in his mad pride, doomed to fail in his growing volition in front of greater technological power.

Bardolph further observes that although Carcass for Hounds owes a debt to the legend and the historical reports like Kimathi and Mathenge, the chief dying in the cave, insane and stoical, has grandeur of romantic figures of fiction. The trial of Dedan Kimathi by Ngugi and Micere Mugo portray the dead general with a special effort to blend history and legend facts and a political message for the present. Mwangi creates a lonely figure, a hero for our time with no message, but duly despair in an absurd world (Bardolph46).

Bardolph also notes that Going Down River Road, Mwangi's second urban novel, is a good move from Kill Me Quick. The thieving gangs have been replaced by a group of labourers who are building the new Nairobi. The unrelieved gloom of the first book is far less effective than the humorous tone in which the hero's sad journey through the city is related in the book. The allegory in the building of the hotel (which stands for the new Kenya), the elements of burlesque and the sad scenes at the brothel, the nightmare visits to the bars - all merge into a strongly constructed whole, drawing in one's imagination the map of a city truer and more vivid than any single African city, or any big city with all its lonely aimless lives (Bardolph146).

Bardolph's argument is that Mwangi is a writer of great stature for he is able to re-create and handle minor characters, arousing a feeling of pity, which is never condescending. She points out that Mwangi creates a lonely hero, Haraka, with no message, but chilly

despair in an absurd world. At the end of the novel readers ask questions as to what message the hero is portraying to the society? Why does he cry for the head of the chief his rival, rather than the land he was fighting for? Why does he kill his followers instead of leaving them to continue the course he started? We are yet to find out if he treats his later heroes more positively than the earlier ones.

Angus Calder in his essay: 'Meja Mwangi's novels' traces the development of Mwangi's novels. He discusses Mwangi's biography briefly and proceeds to critically analyse his novels with the exception of The Last Plague. Calder asserts that Mwangi's first novels were purely meant for entertainment and that Mwangi gives his characters a 'movie language'. He starts his criticism by analysing the Bushtrackers. He argues that Mwangi's Bushtrackers is the 'novelization' of a screenplay by one Gary Strieker. Though the story is set in Kenya, it involves the Mafia, it has a black American villain and a white co-hero, and it presents a string of situations familiar from American thrillers in the less familiar setting of Tsavo Game Park. The story however shallow is told in a fast, extremely exciting way. Calder further asserts that Mwangi's 'novelization' might be judged to be no more than 'pop' fiction, without any real aim beyond entertainment, and hence as of no 'literary' value. However, Calder notes that even Charles Dickens was a mere entertainer when he started writing: (What was the young Dickens, if not an entertainer, at a home 'popular' culture of his day?). This implies that Meja Mwangi's later works would be more meaningful than he started.

Calder proceeds to say that Mwangi uses such popular conventions in Carcase for Hounds to deal with a serious 'historical' subject matter. The style can be acclaimed for bridging the gulf between serious ('over-serious') and popular ('crude') fiction. According to Calder, Mwangi's narratives are not perfect. The mistakes that Mwangi makes in Taste of Death and Kill Me Quick can be tolerated on the basis that Mwangi was a young writer. Consequently, Calder notes further lapses in his later novels. He posits that the lapses are in what filmmakers call 'continuity'. Carcase for Hounds, on the whole a complete '*tour de force*' of gripping narrative, begins with two Mau Mau soldiers moving through the forest. They come to a river. The big one, General Haraka, tells his lieutenant, Kimamo to cross first. The smaller one refuses - "No, you go first I will cover you." The big one shrugs and goes first yet sixteen pages later we have a paragraph beginning "Haraka sighed. 'Kimamo so reliable ...'" and a couple of pages further on, "Kimamo was a man. Hard and brave." As readers we fail to reconcile these thoughts with the apparent cowardice on Kimamo's part, which we saw earlier.

In Going Down River Road (1976), Mwangi's fourth novel, there is still more abrupt jump. Ben Wachira's girl has just left him to run off with her white employer. Ben gets violently drunk in the Karara Centre, hits a prostitute with a beer bottle, and then passes out on the floor. Typical of Karara Centre, no one gives a thought to the lonely drunk (116). The next chapter opens immediately and at its beginning we see Ben entering the Karara Centre, "stuffy as hell, warm as home. Here at least are people: people he understands, people who are people, human beings" (118). Readers still have a problem of reconciling the hostility in previous chapters and the abrupt change in the following

chapter. Ben, because he is tipsy thinks the Karara Centre a friendly place, though in truth it is a 'Centre' for lonely people unconcerned about others.

Inhabited areas in Mwangi's world are generally swarming with rodents and insects. In Kill Me Quick, Meja and Maina get work on a white man's farm. Bedbugs and rats infest their hut. By contrast with his effectively lean treatment of violence, Mwangi's imagination luxuriates around such small intruders. The rats are personified as marauding army, 'a charging mass of furry bodies'. A similar lightness of touch and comic exaggeration pervade even his later novel Cockroach Dance.

According to Calder's observation, Mwangi is more alert to smells, than Ayi Kwei Armah. The successful Mau Mau ambush in Taste of Death leaves the atmosphere smelling of 'blood, burning flesh and oil'. After its dustbin-dominated beginning in Nairobi's back alleys, Kill Me Quick gives the olfactory sense some rest, despite the reek of bhang in the shanty land hut where Maina joins Razor's gang. River Road and The Cockroach Dance however, keep us in Nairobi pervaded throughout with strong smells, mostly nauseating. With this powerful description Mwangi has serious purpose in showing how unsanitary living conditions are for the teeming poor in Kenya's capital. Going Down River Road opens with the reek of a baby urinating in his bed in a one-room flat in a Nairobi suburb, drowning the smell of his harlot mother's perfume. Ben Wachira makes his way from her bed to a communal shower 'dark cold and stale smelling'. Its floor is littered with cigarette filters and other trash. Even so, her environment is salubrious, as he appreciates, compared to the one he left behind in Grogan Road, where

the local sewer has over-flowed and the communal lavatory bowl is a stagnant mess of excrement. In the Karara Centre, Ben's favourite bar, one can smell the toilet - 'stale beer urine as pungent as though the urinal were under the bar counter' - despite the fact that a customer had recently vomited on the floor. In The Cockroach Dance, centred in Grogan Road, filthy smells are even more emphasized.

The countryside, however, harbours equivalent horror. In River Road, Ocholla's family eventually appear from it with starved faces, all their livestock have died in a drought, and the city where he and Ben now share a shanty-land and shack seems by contrast better off. A similar scene of the countryside is present in Kill Me Quick. The jobless and mutilated Meja returns to the folk back home who paid for his 'useless' education, he meets with his half-starved sister and run away before he meets the rest.

Calder notes that since Mwangi's style always tends towards compression and exaggeration, we are paradoxically less aware of his frequent symbolism. "I think he offers us visions of life as Hell, in all his novels: All grace is left from it, in both senses of the word 'grace'" (183). Near the end of Carcase for Hounds the dancing figure of Kimamo is seen in the glare of the village his dwindled guerrillas have set a light as he pursues Haraka's dying wish for the head of the chief, his rival and enemy. To the white soldiers coming up he looks like 'The Devil'.

Commenting on the African situation in Mwangi's world, Calder points out that in Mwangi's novels, African situations and dialogue are stylized in terms of conventions of American movies:

In The Bushtrackers, of course, this is implied by the very nature of the 'novelization' process: Mafia men as projected in a movie will of course talk like Mafia men in movies, and the shootouts and beatings-up will follow the conventions established by movie directors.(184)

Calder disagrees with the stylization in Kill Me Quick. He says that the gang led by the Razor that Maina joins in shanty land, their dialogue and action clearly recalls Hollywood gangster films. He cites the following conversation in Kill Me Quick to support his point:

The sweeper looked the Razor up and down, a puny little creature in comparison to his own bulk. Then he threw his fat cigar to the ground and ground his hoofs on it.

What did you say? the Razor asked again, his hands hanging menacingly by his sides. You brought us an old friend of yours a year back, the sweeper said. We all ended up in jail and two of us were hanged.

How do we know this friend of yours is not a spy like the other?

"I am the Razor," the other said. I decide who joins the gang and who does not.

Right? If you feel you want to have a say in what I do, you form your own gang and lead them to hell and this applies to anyone else in the room who is getting big headed.

He looked around the hut challengingly.

Most of the gang looked away when they met his gaze. It was open though, that they did not agree with him.

'But Razor,' Sara spoke up unexpectedly.

'We must be reasonable. The security of the gang counts before all else.

Then Razor spun round.

'You too in this? Take my advice' he told her. 'You speak when I ask you to speak.'(53-4)

From the above passage, Calder says that the novel is not convincing. Mwangi simply shirks the effort required to keep faith with complex linguistic reality. Only on rare occasions does he even remind us that in the Kenya to which his work refers, Swahili, Gikuyu and other African languages are commonly used, and English is spoken in very diverse styles with very varied degrees of expertise.

In Carcase for Hounds, the Mau Mau fighters speak 'movie dialogue' English. As a glib way perhaps of suggesting his moral degeneracy, Chief Kahuru Wamai is made to speak pidgin briefly to the whites whom he serves in River Road the comic Asian mason, Bhai is given a destructive speech which does sharply evoke the way in which some Asians actually talk. But his African fellow-workers use a slangy Anglo-American idiom, another version of movie-dialogue English. His dialogue lacks subtlety, which is one of the weaknesses of his fiction. His characterization lacks both sharpness and depth, in

great part because his people express themselves as it were, interchangeably with each other.

Calder posits that Ngugi's dignified stylization invests all his characters with dignity. A shared language implies the very potential for communal feeling and action, which Ngugi wishes to realize. The case against Mwangi cannot rest, then, only on his lack of range in dialogue and characterization. It has to move on to 'content' expressed in this limited, limiting fashion, and will point out that his movie style language goes along with the implicit of movie style values. While Ngugi is a communalist and insists on communality as central to African tradition, Mwangi offers us Anglo-American individualism, not always convincingly transplanted to African setting and mocked in effect, by the dis-individualizing nature of his dialogue: in short, 'crude' individualism (186). Mwangi's heroes are 'loners' unable to settle down with a woman, detached from their families (actual or virtual orphans).

Calder further observes that Mwangi's 'gangs' of Mau Mau are more like outlaw cowboys, a wild bunch than the Red Indians. Haraka is dominated, as he dies not by concern for the future of Kenya, but by that prime wild-western motive, the desire for individual revenge against a personal rival (186). Mwangi's slick shallow prose projects a vision of mankind in the mass as mechanical, unable to escape from the systems they find themselves in. He is, in effect, fatalistic. Though Mau Mau have won, Kariuki, at the end of Taste of Death, feels lost without the system he has moved in: "Troops of forest fighters moved in front of his eyes and their guns were firing. Kariuki felt that he was

missing something. He belonged to the world of his friends and firing guns, and not to a world of dead memories”(258). Maina in Kill Me Quick is ruined when he bursts out of the prison-crime-prison system and heads back to his home village. All Ben wants at the end of River Road is to share a shanty with Ocholla, which will be burnt down by the city authorities as a matter of routine, then rebuilt again. Having worked on 'Development House' obeying the system which raises Skyscrapers, Ben and Ocholla will go on to build the next skyscraper. The irony that is inherent in this construction is that while Ben and Ocholla build magnificent buildings to be occupied by other people, they will always retire to their shanty. For them life does not change.

Elizabeth Knight, in her essay, 'The Novels of Meja Mwangi' observes that in Mwangi's prose attitudes tend to be stated rather than evinced, and the verbalization of feelings while making for clarity, leaves little to the readers imagination. She acknowledges Mwangi as one of the few East African writers to concern himself with manual workers and to record their lives so carefully. His work written in a naturalistic manner, there is no authorised voice to pass judgement on characters or to put them in some sort of perspective. Knight concludes her essay by pointing out that Mwangi writes for both popular and serious market and his subject matter to date has been of such obvious and immediate relevance as to attract rapidly growing numbers of young readers (156).

Having observed Meja Mwangi's world and his major concerns in his earlier works it is also important to comment on his women characters. In Mwangi's world women characters are completely unlovable. They are prostitutes: ('they exist for the purpose of

being screwed'), dogs, bitches, beasts, they are like children. In Kill Me Quick, Sara is depicted as Razor's sexual object. The women we find in Kill Me Quick, and River Road are all prostitutes. Wini, Ben's woman that he meets at the brothel eventually runs away with her white boss and leaves her son with Ben. Ben likens Ocholla's wives to animals. He does not find any value in Ocholla's wives. They are worthless. In Carcase for Hounds women are barely mentioned. We are told that the Chief had married Mwaniki's daughter and they failed to get a child. The time the Chief is supposed to be working in the office, he is busy making love to his barren wife. The wife is therefore depicted as a stumbling block to serious business. In the Bushtrackers, Mwangi tries to redeem Sofi but she dies before she is developed. She is brutally raped by a gang. Still in the Bushtrackers, women are also presented as a source of joy for men:

His mind was turning at a fast pace. The long session with the women had opened up his mind and resharpened his wits. Now for the first time since his arrival at Orange Estate he could see things clearly. He could even smell the falling night. He heard the night birds call, heard leaves fall from the trees on the lawn. He was himself again. (109)

The Last Plague is Mwangi's latest novel. Since he is dealing with the theme of HIV/AIDS, it is interesting to find out how he portrays his women characters. His earlier works, as critics point out, are merely meant for entertainment. Readers have little to learn from his narratives. They are written with a pessimistic tone. No hope for the suffering manual worker. Literature, as Indangasi puts it in his seminar paper entitled: 'The Kenyanness of Kenyan Literature' strives to raise men above the claims of

humiliating reality and show him to himself not as a slave, but as a master of reality, as the free creator of life. In this sense, literature remains revolutionary. The Last Plague being at the centre of this study will be analysed with the aim of identifying Mwangi's vision as he deals with the theme of HIV/AIDS pandemic. Does his hero or heroine have a message for the audience? Are they slaves or masters of reality?

This study also acknowledges the existence of other creative works by Kenyan writers that have dealt with the theme of HIV/AIDS. Joseph Situma, for example, has written a novel: The Mysterious Killer. The novel deals with the theme of HIV/AIDS. He portrays a country, which is in a deep mourning. People are dying at an alarming rate yet they cannot fathom the cause. The village awakens to the loss when Cecilia, a city dweller, returns to Nkulu suffering from a mysterious disease. Many villagers believe she has been bewitched. Three bulls are offered as a sacrifice to the departed ancestors. The sacrifice fails to restore Cecilia to good health. She sends Rachel her niece, to Wauzi to consult a well-known medicine man. Rachel enters the medicine man's house and is shocked to see a python coiled around a sooty pet. The medicine man invokes the spirits of the ancestral goddess and gives Rachel mixed herbs for Cecilia. The herbs do not work a miracle for Cecilia to get well. She eventually dies.

In Situma's world, the characters are not ready to accept that HIV/AIDS is real. The characters seem to be buried in their traditional beliefs and they are not ready to accept the reality, neither are they ready for change.

Macharia Mwangi in his short story entitled: 'Reversed Dreams' captures the dilemma of a young man, Munga, who had tested HIV positive. Munga's dreams of a happy future are shattered. He is psychologically tortured and suffers from the fear of revealing the bad news to his girlfriend. Mwangi's short story explores the psychological torture that the victim suffers. As the title (Reversed Dreams) suggests, there is no hope for a better future for Munga.

Carolyn Adalla, in her novel: Confessions of an AIDS Victim examines how HIV has closed doors for Catherine Njeri. Catherine Njeri, a beautiful, young and intelligent woman, learns with shock and utter disbelief that she is HIV positive which makes her an AIDS victim. This means many things to her; she cannot go ahead with her plans to study for her Masters degree in the USA and she has to start thinking like somebody who is at the end of her life. In a heart-breaking style, she makes the revelation to her long time friend, Marilyn, in the form of a letter. The confessions are frank and provide a lot of factual information about AIDS in Kenya as Njeri's life unfolds. Njeri's future is ruined. She cannot pursue her ambitions.

Marjorie Oludhe's novel: Chira deals with HIV/AIDS but her characters do not fully accept the reality. They perceive AIDS as a taboo disease, which attacks people who have gone against the norms of the society. At the end of the novel it is not clear whether AIDS is real or not, though people die emaciated from a mysterious disease they do not understand.

Apart from prose writers, poets have also written poems dealing with the theme of HIV/AIDS. Plays, for example, Waigwa Wachira's 'Gift of a Stranger' show the effects of the disease. Oral literature genres such as: Oral stories, riddles, poetry, dance and songs have been utilized to communicate the message about HIV/AIDS. In this study we set to achieve our objectives by focusing on Meja Mwangi's prose work The Last Plague.

Scope and Limitations

This study has been confined to only one novel: The Last Plague by Meja Mwangi. This has enabled the researcher to carry out a comprehensive study on The Last Plague. While recognizing other forms of literature that deal with the theme of HIV/AIDS, the research has used the novel as its point of departure. The main focus is on the artistic treatment of the theme of HIV/AIDS and society.

Hypothesis

This study works on the premise that literature being a functional art Meja Mwangi creatively captures the concept of HIV/AIDS with a view of making us to understand it better. We also surmise that as a literary artist Mwangi artistically breaks the silences that surround the dreaded disease and also illuminates hope on the infected and the affected persons. The study also assumes that HIV/AIDS, as a phenomenon of human experience, has impacted negatively on gender roles and relations in society.

Methodology

This study commences with a close reading of the text, The Last Plague, with the aim of understanding how Meja Mwangi creatively delineates the concept of HIV/AIDS. We shall further conduct a library research to obtain the material that is necessary in interpreting the text. Relevant material from the Internet will also be incorporated in the study. ABC of Gender Analysis developed by Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira and Masheti Masinjila will be used as a tool to analyse gender relations.

Meja Mwangi's biography

It is apt to familiarize ourselves with the author's background before we commence the study. This is because writers belong to particular societies and they tend to be influenced by their experiences. However, we hold the view that literature is a product of human imagination. Wellek and Warren hold the following view about a writer:

Since every writer is a member of society, he can be studied as a social being. Though his biography is the main source, such a study can easily widen into one of the whole milieu from which he came and in which he lived. It will be possible to accumulate information about the social provenance, the family background, and the economic position of the writers. (96)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o affirms that a writer comes from a particular class, race and nation. He proceeds by saying:

A writer after all comes from a particular class, race, and nation. He himself is a product of an actual social process - eating, drinking, learning, loving, hating - and he has developed a class attitude to all those activities, themselves class conditioned. A writer is trying to persuade us, to make us view not only a certain kind of reality, but also from a certain angle of vision often, though perhaps unconsciously on behalf of a certain class, race or nation. (Ngugi 6)

It is a fact that a writer does not spring from a vacuum. He is born in a particular society. Though it is possible for a writer to be influenced by his or her background, it is also true that works of art are products of imagination. It is therefore important to study the biography of Meja Mwangi for this will provide us with the insights into his works.

Meja Mwangi is a Kenyan writer. He was born in Nyeri district, in December 1948. His father died when he was very young and his mother brought up her children and sent them to school by working in the homes of Europeans in the town of Nanyuki near the foot of Mt. Kenya.

He schooled in Nanyuki primary and secondary schools before he proceeded to take 'A' level science at Kenyatta College, Nairobi. His first name is David but he adopted Meja as his pen name. In an interview, which was conducted by Lee Nichols, Mwangi says that when he was in lower primary he used to tell stories in class, and he was always a good storyteller. He says, "every time it came to telling stories, I was the one to do the

telling". Mwangi asserts that he loved telling stories of giants, and every time he told the same story but his audience loved it.

When Mwangi reached class five (fifth year of elementary school), he started reading children's books. He had an advantage in that his mother was working for white people, so she had access to children's storybooks, which she always brought for him. He read the books and liked the stories. From there he started reading small novels. He continued reading stories and at one point he was inspired to write a story like the ones he had read. He therefore started writing and the first one was a story about the Mau Mau. This was a movement by Kenyan militants against the British rule in the nineteen fifties. He also read James Ngugi's novel, Weep Not Child, which inspired him further to write his own story.

Mwangi was about seventeen years when he started writing. He also used to paint, so he wrote the story and decided to illustrate it through painting but nobody seemed to be impressed. He therefore decided to rewrite the story. This very story later became a novel entitled Taste of Death which he gave to his English teacher to read. His teacher advised him to make a few changes to improve the quality of the story. The teacher also commented that his grammar was poor and it needed to be improved. He made the changes and shelved the story for a year. It was during one of his holidays that he rewrote the story and submitted it to a publisher.

Kill Me Quick was Meja Mwangi's second novel although it was the first to be published. He started by writing short stories and when he took them to the publishers, they told him that most of them were okay but they were not enough to make a novel. He went back and added to the collection, changed some few things and rearranged the chapters.

Answering a question during an interview as to why he writes, Meja Mwangi maintains that his aim of writing novels is to awaken his audience to a realization of the atmosphere around them. He says:

The message that I want to give is to give the audience - particularly East African, Kenyan audience - a realization of the atmosphere around them. You get a feeling walking down the street that everybody is living in his own little hut. They don't know what is happening just in the street behind the one they are on and this is what I am trying to show. (Nichols 197)

Mwangi as a writer accepts that his background has influenced his choice of themes. It has been observed that Mwangi writes about urban poverty. He greatly identifies with street life. Mwangi says that he was brought up in a ghetto where all Africans in Nanyuki town were concentrated during the emergency. He was, therefore, brought up together with very poor people-- the beggars and almost street boys. This is why when he writes about street life, he almost captures the real experience, with some tone of exaggeration. He confesses that Carcase for Hounds was inspired by an incident he witnessed. He confirms that Nanyuki used to be a big concentration place for British Armed Forces.

The British used to go up the mountain, shoot down freedom fighters, bring them in Nanyuki town and display them. Mwangi was once arrested and taken to the police station where he found a row of dead bodies displayed. This experience prompted him to write Carcase for Hounds.

When Mwangi was asked about the role of an East African writer, he said that an East African writer should inform people of what is happening around them. He says:

He has a social-function to perform... that people have got to be told what is happening to them. I have seen a few books come out recently, contemporary writing and people were so excited about certain things, certain very everyday things, because although they knew they were happening.... They want to read the more serious things about themselves. (201)

According to Mwangi, the purpose for informing the audience about their environment is to change the audience's outlook on life. He points out that when the society is not sensitized on what is happening around them, there is a tendency to just look and turn away. To him, street boys like those of Kill Me Quick are found everywhere; the society cannot afford to close their eyes on them. If they can read about them, consider them and plan for them, then the society can improve.

When he was asked whom he usually writes for, his reply was that he writes for everybody who can read English, since his medium of expression is English. Meja Mwangi is not only a writer, but an accomplished film producer as well. He has

achieved worldwide recognition as an exciting writer. He has won various awards: Carcase for Hounds and The Last Plague won him the Inaugural Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature. Meja Mwangi is still writing to date; and we expect more exciting works of art from him.

Summary

This chapter has provided the framework under which the study has been conducted. The study observes that there is so much silence that surrounds the issues of HIV/AIDS hence the need to approach it from a literary point of view .It employs the sociological literary theory to investigate the treatment of the theme HIV/AIDS. The next chapter focuses on the impact of HIV/AIDS on society.

CHAPTER TWO

HIV/AIDS and Society

The main objective of this chapter is to show how HIV/AIDS has affected the economy, academic and the social life styles of the village of "Crossroads". Literature as Ngugi wa Thiong'o puts it, embodies in words and images the tensions, conflicts and contradictions at the heart of the community's being and process of becoming. He says:

Literature results from conscious acts of men in society. At the level of the individual artist, the very act of writing implies a social relationship: one is writing about somebody for somebody. At the collective level, literature as a product of men's intellectual and imaginative activity embodies, in words and images, the tensions, conflicts, contradictions at the heart of a community's being and process of becoming. It is a reflection on the aesthetic and imaginative planes, of a community's wrestling with its total environment to produce the basic means of life, food, clothing, shelter and in the process creating and recreating itself in history.

(Ngugi 5-6)

Meja Mwangi in his novel, The Last Plague, reflects the conflicts that arise from HIV/AIDS. The novel examines the impact of HIV/AIDS on a small village known as Crossroads. Immediately we start reading the text, we are presented with a pervading

sense of solitariness and desolation. Outside the teahouse, he is whiling away time and playing what is ordinarily a game of two people on his own. The oldman, himself solitary, poses "How do you do it. How do you play draughts all by yourself? Its impossible "He quips "but I do it...it is quite simple .You see the left hand has no eye to see what the right eye is up to..."².This shows that people are trying to cope with the state of desperation.

We learn that the teahouse is largely deserted when the proprietor (Musa) angrily retorts, "I shall close down this place."⁽³⁾ Probably the fact that there are no revellers explains why he is playing draughts alone. Uncle Mark's advice proves quite handy, however," light the fire...someone will see the smoke from a far and stop by today."⁽³⁾ Thus right from the beginning the artist makes it clear that the place is suffering from some worrying sense of desolation. We are therefore being appraised on the fact that, the oldman "scowled at the empty street" (1) does not constitute an exception. When we meet the oldman, he is also alone and so is the beggar whom the landing thud of his phlegm wakes up.

In the second episode, the spotlight turns on Mark .He "was a retired survivor" we are told. To offer further insight into his kind of life, the artist tells us that,"The old people held him in great awe ...the women in turn, admired him and referred to him as *mzee kijana* (the young oldman) for reasons only they themselves understood and the young people respected him too and called him *ka Guy*, the young old thug ..." (5). We can therefore not fail to attribute his survival to his glaring oddities.

One thing is for certain, however that he has defied all odds and weathered many a storm to the surprise of all and sundry. So this very short episode curtly makes a statement on what bedevils this society. Only those characters who have refused to dance the common tune have survived. Everything about Uncle Mark remains a puzzle. Both Uncle Mark and Mzee Musa have never married. They live a mystery and thus manages to survive, and "watch crossroads die."

The term crossroads signifies dilemma. To be at a crossroad is to be lost, it is a situation whereby one has to make a sensible choice. As the name of the village suggests, the members of Crossroads village are in turmoil. HIV/AIDS has hit the village and people no longer talk about it in whispers, yet they are unwilling to seek guidance on how to prevent the spread of the disease because it is a taboo in Crossroads village to talk about sexual matters explicitly. The villagers are scared of the scourge, which is killing most of their young adults and leaving the village bare. They do not know which way to go nor do they know the solution to this unending problem.

There is no day, which passes without Crossroads burying an AIDS victim. Crossroads is a dying society. The members of the community are helpless, they are at a crossroad, and they call the disease: 'the plague'. Funerals are no longer communal affairs but a family affair. The villagers only inquire about who has died and the story ends there. They take no action even to help the bereaved with the burial. This is evident in the following dialogue:

"Who is in that box?" Musa asked

"Our son, Thomas", the old woman replied

"What happened to him?"

"He died," the old man said

"Great sadness," Musa told him

"Did AIDS kill your Thomas?"

"That is what ate our Thomas"

"Great sadness," Musa mumbled

"Why do you bury him alone?" he asked the old couple

"Who is there to bury him with?" said the old man

"Have you no other children?"

"Thomas was our last child, AIDS ate them all."**(Mwangi 11-12)**

AIDS has killed so many people in Crossroads until the villagers are left with no more words to console each other. The mood of despair and disillusionment pervades the whole novel. The old man (a businessman) we meet at the beginning of the novel is tired and dejected. He appears to have lost hope in life. He declares: "I shall die of sadness." **(Mwangi 2)**. The old man was once an energetic man, a bricklayer. He had built most of the business premises on Crossroads market. He had built the teahouse, the highlife lodge, the old service station and the post office. The feeling we get is that the buildings were once beautiful and functional but they are now crumbling down and becoming dust. Most of the lodgings, shops and bars had been closed down. This is an indication that

these people lacked some basic things in their lives, which is evident through the closure of the shops. It is implied that the business owners died and others fled in fear of the plague.

The post office, which is a symbol of communication with the outside world, is no more. The members of this community do not even have radios. It is only uncle Mark who reads old newspapers brought by the only bus, (the Far Traveller) which passes through Crossroads. This is clear evidence that the dwellers of Crossroads village are out of touch with the outside world as they cannot easily send or receive messages from other parts of the country and the entire world. The only phone booth that exists on Crossroads is non-functional and the beggar has secured it as his home. This is a closed village that is dying of AIDS and lack of communication. It is also clear that their economy has crumbled down because the businesses have collapsed. No new currency circulates in Crossroads and when the members of Crossroads village come across new currency, they do not believe that it is money. They are used to the old, dirty, crumbled notes that circulate in Crossroads. This is illustrated during Brokers return. He comes back with new notes that the villagers cannot recognize:

Musa took the money and examined it carefully. It was all new, very smooth and very clean and it smelt of freshly sawed wood. (Mwangi 201)

Musa cannot fathom the kind of money that Broker gives him. At first he refuses to take the money and returns it to Broker. When Uncle Mark, who had been exposed, scrutinises the money and proves it as genuine note, he convinces Musa to take it.

The petrol station lay bare and vandalised. This implies that Crossroads once had good transport system, and it must have been a productive market, a market where many vehicles were fuelled. The life in Crossroads changed its course as the HIV/AIDS pandemic rooted itself in the village. People changed roles. Grave digging had replaced hoeing and where once they dug and planted cassava, now they planted people (3). The disease has shattered the hopes and dreams of many:

It shook the earth and churned the skies, buffeted whole communities and shattered the hopes and dreams, and the minds and spirits of families and clans. The ruthless monster jolted societies and wrecked economies and threatened to completely annihilate Crossroads to wipe out her tradition and culture. (Mwangi 4)

The life expectancy of these people has reduced. No one makes long-term plans for they know that the plague is going to sweep them all. There is no more investment in Crossroads and no hope for a bright future. The roads in Crossroads are rough and full of potholes and the only bus (The Far Traveller) that passes through Crossroads is old and decrepited. This is a sure sign that the transport system had collapsed. We are told that the only vehicles that came to Crossroads were those that brought back corpses of the sons and daughters of Crossroads who had left Crossroads in search of greener pastures. This is illustrated below:

A long the dusty highways, hearses of every nature and description groaned under the weight of their grief battered lorries and pick up trucks and buses, heavy laden

with coffins and mourners and hung with red ribbons, checked along, creaking and complaining and steaming at the radiators; their over-burdened engines about to give up and die themselves. (**Mwangi 21-22**)

The kinds of vehicles that come to Crossroads are lifeless and they continue transporting sorrow back to Crossroads. The demise of the productive young men and women has led to the death of the village because there are no visionary leaders. It is young men and women that can dream of longer life, and they are the people who can think of repairing the roads and starting lucrative businesses. Things in Crossroads are in doldrums; for those already dead; their homesteads remained dark and encircled with bushes. Their walls and fences rotted away and crumbled down and people continued dying:

There were burial mounds everywhere one turned. Large brooding things, darkly vibrant with death, and there was hardly a single homestead in Crossroads that did not host one or two or three or more of these terrible reminders of the futility of man. And where there was one today, tomorrow they would be two. Two became four and four became eight. They grew, they multiplied and they mutated. They turned into monsters, hungry beasts with insatiable craving for human life. (**Mwangi 22**)

The breakdown of the transport and communication systems and the numerous deaths caused by HIV/AIDS has also had a direct impact on the education system. In Kenya, according to the statistics released on Daily Nation newspaper dated 10/12/2001 by the Education Permanent Secretary, eighteen teachers die every month from AIDS related

complications. This translates into a loss of more than 6,570 teachers annually, which is nearly double the number of teachers in the entire North Eastern province. Apart from shortage of staff, children's participation in schools is affected due to the demise of their parents. Consequently, they lack school needs such as fees, waste time in funerals; family savings are spent in the treatment and during the funerals. There is also increased domestic labour, which force children (especially girls) to drop out of school and take care of their parents. Mwangi has tried to capture this reality. It seems education in Crossroads is not given the first priority. Matters concerning education are superficially mentioned. The author does not explain to us if there were secondary schools in Crossroads or not. We only hear of primary schools and a village polytechnic.

The superficial approach towards academic matters delineates the despair that pervades the whole novel. People are dying and they care less about the learning conditions of their children. The illustration below shows how the community had neglected the school:

The schoolhouse was a long building constructed of grey stone and corrugated iron sheets. The roof had originally been painted green, but it was now patchy and brown from dust and from years of neglect. The school had not seen a coat of paint in years. The walls were rough and most of the windows were now gaping holes... A tattered national flag flew on a rotting pole in front of the parade ground. The crooked pole itself stood about a square yard of cactus flower garden, the only space that had not as yet been taken over by grass and weeds.

(Mwangi 140)

Everything in the school is falling apart. The buildings have been neglected and the rust is eating away the roof. The image of rote and weeds explains the lifeless situation in the school. It proves that everybody on the compound including teachers pay little attention to themselves for the only place without weeds is where the crooked flag post stands. The compound is bushy and dirty. Such an environment signals the danger that awaits the occupants. For fierce animals such as snakes like such dark places.

The conditions displayed call into question the quality of education that the children receive. The children are not encouraged to discover themselves and to appreciate their environment. This is the reason why Crossroads does not have many educated people. There are many orphans in Crossroads who do not go to school because of lack of guardians. They live like wild animals for they have to provide food for themselves. They are always hungry and alert. "There were about twenty of them, all rugged and dusty; emaciated creatures with hungry and hostile eyes" (318). None of the children is a day over thirteen years old. Everybody in society seems to have given up about helping such children to acquire education. It is only Broker who returns to Crossroads with a vision to resurrect Crossroads, to build an orphanage for them.

Although the scourge has claimed most lives in Crossroads, people are still adamant. They still regard sex education as a taboo and they are not ready to seek knowledge about the epidemic. The teachers, who are the elites of the society are reluctant to incorporate sex education in their relevant subjects. The children are ignorant and they use condoms

as balloons. It is after much struggle that Janet and Frank are allowed to teach sex education to mature pupils.

A national flag symbolizes the values and the pride of a nation. Patriotic citizens are always proud of their flag and wherever it is raised, they show respect. The care it is given reflects the amount of love a citizen has for his/her country. The tattered flag raised on a crooked post on the school compound is a clear proof that the school authorities are unconcerned with the national affairs. The flag has no meaning in their lives. They have no vision outside Crossroads. The tattered flag and the general conditions of the school show the poverty level of the school and that of Crossroads as a whole. Productive people (especially businessmen) have died and therefore the school has no source of income.

The ignorance and negligence of the quality of education and matters that affect the society is also reflected through the chief of the society. Chief Chupa, who is the government representative in the area is an illiterate person and is less concerned with the sensitive issues of HIV/AIDS that affect his society. He holds power and authority and he is in a better position to mobilise Crossroads members to use condoms and to attend family life education seminars, yet he does not. He says that he can only use condoms if Janet accepts to be his wife. On this note, he can order everybody in Crossroads to use condoms. He says: "I will be very good to you... I will use Kodom. I will order all Crossroads men to use Kodom." The chief is not ready to listen to Janet; he is out to satisfy his selfish needs. Though he has many wives, he still wants more. Though his

life is at risk -- he can easily contract the disease -- he still does not want to be taught how to avoid it. As a result, he does not want other people to be educated.

HIV/AIDS is like a sword that is cutting the cultural aspects of the society in pieces. A culture of the people embodies their values, their aesthetic and moral qualities that they consider basic and important while interacting with one another and with the whole universe. It is the basis of a people's outlook, how they see themselves and their place in the universe and in relation to other communities. Therefore, it is imperative to state that each community has its culture, which is reflected in social acts. Amitai Etzioni, a sociologist, says that to be is to be social:

Man is not unless he is social. What he depends on his social being is irrevocably bound to what he makes of himself. He has the ability to master his internal being, and the main way of self-mastery leads to his joining others like himself in social acts. (Etzioni 2)

Etzioni further says that in any given society, certain needs are better satisfied than others and that is why social problems arising out of unfulfilled needs differ from one society to another. The members of Crossroads are social beings and they have their social needs, which are inherent in their cultural practices. According to Crossroads' dwellers, wife inheritance is a cultural aspect, which must be fulfilled. This is well illustrated when Kata Kataa's brother dies. Although it was rumoured that Solomon had died of HIV/AIDS, Kata is ready to inherit his wife. Janet, who is a village educationist and a sister to Kata's wife, feels it is her responsibility to save her sister's life. She talks to Julia

(her sister) about the danger of infection that lies ahead of them and advises her to discourage her husband from inheriting the late Solomon's wife.

Julia who is not yet emancipated from the cultural practices gets annoyed with her sister and walks away in protest. Julia says she has no right to discourage her husband from inheriting his brother's wife; after all it is a practice that has taken place since their community came into existence. It is the tradition of the people of Crossroads that once somebody has paid dowry, the wife becomes his full property and can be subjected to any form of danger, without rejection. This is clearly illustrated in grandmother's words. She says: "she is his wife, ...bought and paid for completely." Grandmother uttered these words when Janet tried to explain to her why Julia should separate with her husband in case Kata inherits his brother's wife. Grandmother, who is the epitome of the past, cements the strength of their culture.

Janet does not give up either, she convinces Frank to talk to Kata and warns him against the danger of inheriting his brother's wife. When Frank tries talking to Kata, Kata gets annoyed; he ends up beating Frank and chasing him out of his compound. Janet forwards the case to the area chief, who eventually convenes a 'baraza' and asks Janet to state her case before the gathering. The meeting breaks in disarray before the ruling. Janet loses at this stage.

Wife inheritance is one of the cultural practices that enhance the fast spread of the HIV virus. It is a culture that is deeply rooted in the communities that practice it. This is

clearly illustrated in the reaction of people at the 'baraza'. It is implied that the chief wanted to rule the case against the woman because culturally women have to be crushed, but he did not know how. Many people have died in Crossroads, many homes have remained empty with rats, snakes and ghosts as their occupants, but people are not ready to abandon this practice. They cherish it, they respect it, and they are ready to defend it and keep it alive in Crossroads.

Traditional circumcision (where the circumciser uses one knife for all candidates) is another way through which the virus is spread. Circumcision is a ceremony that the people of Crossroads love and respect. It is an act that brings members of the society together to celebrate and socialise. During this period, everybody is excited, we are told that women sing as they cook away from the candidates while men sing and dance with the candidates. The boys are lined up naked, in a highly charged circle of men at the other end, each one of them supported and braced by two men both of whom are well fortified and with roasted goat and sorghum wine (108).

It is at this celebration that Janet arrives and opposes the whole act. The whole situation degenerates into anarchy, and she does not manage to convince the people that what they are doing is wrong. In this confusion, Frank becomes a victim. The crowd demands that he be stripped naked and be circumcised again. The reaction of the crowd depicts how deeply rooted the people are in their cultural ways. Though the crowd is hostile to Janet, her method sounds crude. This is because from the beginning of the story up to where Janet stops the function, we have not encountered any place where she has held a seminar

to teach the people the ways through which the HIV virus is transmitted. It is an abrupt action both to her audience and to the reader. It is therefore expected that such a wrong approach cannot yield fruits. Although she manages to stop the function, chances for its continuity are still high because people do not understand how the disease can be spread through a practice they have celebrated all the years of their lives. What the people of Crossroads need is nothing but education to help them understand the disease more.

Research has revealed that when family members in urban areas fall ill, they often return to their villages to be cared for by their families thus adding to the call on scarce resources and increasing the probability that a spouse or others in the rural community will be infected. The kind of homecoming that occurs in Crossroads is tragic. People return to Crossroads when they know that they are about to die:

It was to this Crossroads, to this land of death and despair that everyone returned when they died, or when they thought that they were about to die. (Mwangi 23)

Frank Fundi returns to Crossroads after several years of disappearance. People had long forgotten him. He returns to Crossroads because he has tested HIV positive. Frank is a changed man:

He was twenty-seven years old, long-faced and stoop-shouldered, from the terrible burdens he had had to carry. A great deal had happened to him during that time, and he had grown older and wise and many things beside, but that was as it should have been. No one returned the same person that they were when they left home. (24)

Frank has lost much weight, joy and hope. He is a sad and wretched man. He returns to their home to find rest but he is disappointed. Their house is full of orphans and he cannot find space for himself. Just as he has changed Crossroads has also changed, it is not the same. His mother has inherited the orphans from the dead neighbours. The children sleep everywhere:

They slept in the empty grain store and in the empty goat-house and on the beds and under the beds and anywhere there was space to lie down to sleep.
(mwangi47)

Frank spent the first night of his return at the fireplace. When he sets off to his aunt's place to seek accommodation, he is informed that his aunt has orphans too. Frank ends up at Mzee Musa's place where he secures a room for himself. Frank's vision is to open up an animal clinic and earn his living from the business. Although he opens the clinic, his business does not run well for none of Crossroads members is ready to pay his debts. In most cases, he treats the animals free of charge and for those who are generous enough, they give him lunch instead of money.

Bakari Ben Broker is another person who returns to Crossroads after a period of ten years. In spite of him having a lot of money and driving a good car, he has greatly reduced. When he parks his car outside Janet's house, nobody recognises him. People expect to see a healthy and energetic man emerging from the car, but "what they saw was

one emaciated, old creature, of indeterminable age, with a shiny, bony forehead, thinning brown hair, large eyes that were about to disappear back into their cavernous sockets" (164).

Broker returns with a vision for Crossroads. He has enough money and is ready to resurrect the dead society. After many years of suffering from the plague, after visiting many hospitals, he decides to return home, to spend his last days with his first wife that he had abandoned ten years earlier. He is certain his wife would welcome him home joyfully because he has money and a car. Things do not turn out the way he expected. Janet throws him out. He is not the Broker that Janet knew. He went away a young poor man; he comes back a rich old emaciated man who is on the verge of death.

Janet has also changed. Many years of single hood have hardened her. She is aware of the scourge, she has never entertained a man in her bed after the disappearance of Broker, and she is not ready to invite him once more in her life. Broker, like Frank, ends up at Musa's teahouse where he rents a room for himself. He starts various projects such as the renovation of the petrol station, building an orphanage, and repairing the church.

Jemina who had run away with Broker to Mombasa to realise her dream of becoming rich also comes back home when she is dying. Jemina's dream was to make enough money so that she could take care of her children and those of her sisters and brothers who had already died. She wanted to make her relatives proud of her. The implication we get is that she was earning her money through prostitution and in the event contracted the HIV

virus. Jemina like Broker comes back with a vision of rebuilding their home but she dies before completing her project.

It is sad that people return home only when they are about to die. Some like Nerita, the cobbler, the washer, Thomas and many others returned in coffins. It is indeed an ironical homecoming. People in Crossroads return to die instead of returning home to celebrate and to reunite with their families. It appears as if those who leave Crossroads are the ones who come back with the HIV virus.

The campaign against the scourge in this community is weak. Most people in the community are reluctant to pick up the campaign. The government has hired Janet to educate her community about family life education. She has been given pills and condoms to distribute free of charge, and to explain to people how to use them. The pills are to prevent women from getting unwanted pregnancies while the condom has two functions: to prevent unwanted pregnancies and to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. The society laughs at Janet and dismisses her crusade as a vulgar and foreign imposition and an exercise in futility. Towards the end of the novel, Janet receives support from a non-governmental organisation. The private doctors move in and they agree to carry out a free blood test for all those willing to be tested.

Though the test helps Janet to discover how many people are HIV positive, the support is insignificant. It could have been better if they hired more people to assist Janet in the campaign. The doctors should have trained a few people to understand how to curb the

virus so that they can teach the local people in a language they understood. They acted as if Crossroads belonged to Janet and it is up to Janet to come up with effective strategies of creating awareness to the community. The government, which hired her, is withdrawn. The government officials who should support Janet are more ignorant than anybody else in the village.

Summary

This chapter has examined the extent to which HIV/AIDS has affected Crossroads. Economically, the disease has killed all promising young men and women. As a result, all business premises have been closed down and the community has become poorer than it was. No new currency circulates in Crossroads; the only money that the society knows is old and dirty. Transport and communication systems have broken down, therefore, the community is out of touch with the contemporary issues. The members of the community are hopeless and disillusioned. Their future is bleak. Their life expectancy has reduced and therefore, no long-term investment is done.

The disease has impacted negatively on the education system. Most children are orphans who have nobody to provide for them their basic needs such as food, shelter and education. They have remained in homes for they have no sponsors to take them to school. At school, teachers are also relaxed and they are not keen on their environment. They are aware that AIDS is killing people and yet they are not ready to seek knowledge about it and teach the students. Janet and Frank are the only people who are campaigning

against the spread of the scourge. Although Janet appears to be strong and daring, she is semi-literate. She does not have enough facts about the disease.

This unskilled personnel in the community has also resulted in limited programmes for various target groups. Crossroads needs adequate capacity of trained and skilled personnel to introduce programmes that can suit the old men and women, the youth and the children. Janet as the key crusader lacks the skills to convince people to use condoms.

Socially, the disease has broken the cultural aspects of the people of Crossroads. The community approves wife inheritance. It is actually an unwritten rule that when a husband dies, the wife must be taken care of. It is a sign that the community cares for the widows and their families. But things have changed. Janet is now teaching them to abandon this practice. Traditional circumcision is another aspect that every person in Crossroads must pass through. It is a practice whereby one knife is used to circumcise all the candidates. This is another practice, which the community has to change. The two practices are sure ways of spreading the HIV virus and the community is reluctant to abandon them. Generally there is a mood of despair and hopelessness that pervades the whole novel. Though Broker tries to resurrect crossroads and to give it new life, he dies as soon as the projects pick up.

The name of this village depicts the dilemma that HIV/AIDS has created. To be at a crossroad, is to be at a confused state, a state where you cannot move and you are

supposed to make a sound judgement. Mwangi is trying to capture the contemporary state of HIV/AIDS and he is also depicting the future state of HIV/AIDS. It is true that people are dying, it is also true that many homes have remained empty, but if the cure for the virus remains elusive, soon people will be at a crossroad and they will resemble the characters in Crossroads. Right now, we have visionary people trying to come up with the vaccine, others teaching people to abstain or to avoid unprotected sex but once they die of the same virus things will be at a standstill. People will lack words to console each other and nobody will think of an orphanage because people will be counting their days and no homestead will lack the grave of an AIDS victim.

Funerals will be conducted at family levels because every family will be burying someone each day. But if the community heeds the call of prevention now, then, there will be no more cries. The virus will no longer infect people. The community has to make a decision either to follow their old traditions and die or to break the silences that surround the disease and live.

The next chapter focuses on HIV/AIDS and gender dynamics.

CHAPTER THREE

HIV/AIDS and the Gender Dynamics

The main objective of this chapter is to analyse gender relations in the society that has been affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The central tool of analysis in this chapter is the ABC of Gender Analysis developed by Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira and Masheti Masinjila. Using this toolkit the study examines the roles that the society has allocated for both males and females in society and how this facilitates the spread of the HIV scourge. The ABC of Gender Analysis framework proceeds on the assumption that:

each and every textbook and all learning materials tell a story about people; how they relate to one another and to the environment within which they live. ...Writers of textbooks create a human world in which people do things that learners recognize and easily identify with to the extent that they can see themselves in the textbook world. (9)

It is, therefore, evident that almost all stories mirror the reality of everyday life. Writers give life to their texts by indirectly narrating a story about how people relate, and the activities they involve themselves in order to survive. It then follows that the world painted in textbooks present a gendered picture of the world. Gender, therefore, refers to the social relations of men and women in society.

Society has defined different roles for men and women. Writers in a sense create stories about men, boys, women and girls that can be determined through textual analysis. The

central theme being discussed in this project is the treatment of HIV/AIDS, a disease that is mainly transmitted through sexual contact.

Sexuality contributes significantly to the spread of HIV/AIDS, yet it is a taboo subject to most cultures. Men are often made to believe their male sexual needs are strong and that because of these, they can easily succumb to the seduction of women. Such notions make some men appear to be governed by their instincts unable to control their sexual behaviour, and the victims of female power. As a result, society always excuses men for not behaving responsibly for example, not using condoms. On the other hand, women are reluctant to buy or carry condoms because of their fear of being accused of wanting to entice or seduce men. Furthermore, society allows men to have multiple sexual partners by permitting polygamy and condemning polyandry. These traditions are directly evident in "Crossroads" society, a human world created by Meja Mwangi.

The tradition of Crossroads society allows men to marry many wives and it is also 'legal' for them to inherit widows. Kata Kataa, the village herbalist has a wife, yet, he is out to inherit his brother's wife despite the fact that the brother had died of AIDS.

Janet who is the village educationist gets concerned and advises Julia not to allow her husband to inherit his brother's wife. Julia reacts so acrimoniously because she knows that her husband is supposed to take care of his late brother's family. It is 'offensive' for Kata not to inherit his late brother's wife. Janet does not give up; she pursues the case and accuses Kata before a 'baraza' convened by the area chief, the village elders, and the

district administration officers. Nothing much is achieved since the people who are to pass judgement believe in the customs. They consider it to be the most generous thing a man can do to his late brother's wife. As a result Kata's desire to inherit Julia never die. He later accepts to use condoms when Julia shows him pictures of people suffering from AIDS. Though he yields to the use of condoms, he does not go for them himself, instead he sends Julia (95).

In Mwangi's world, condoms are associated with shame. Real men cannot use condoms and that is why Kata sends Julia to go for the 'shameful things'. This clearly illustrates the fact that in Crossroads village, men are 'greater' than women. Women can be associated with shame but men have to maintain their dignity. Kata later warns his wife Julia "If I ever catch you with another man... I will kill you. Do you hear me?" (388). This is an indication that Kata has a prerogative to marry more wives but his wife cannot have another man.

Consequently, it is a taboo for women to discuss with their husbands matters related to sex. They have no say in the number of children they should have. They have no freedom of choosing when they should have sex with their partners. Due to this suppression, women have developed fear for their husbands. This is clearly illustrated in the following dialogue: Hanna Habari says:

"He will not let me sleep at night and the last child is still suckling"

"Why don't you make him wait" Janet asked her

"Make him?" Hanna laughed...

"Ask him?" Janet corrected herself

"You always make me laugh. Did your Broker ever ask you whether you wanted another child?"

"He never even thanked me for them" Janet said

"The only time men worry about children is when there is dowry to be Paid or received" Hanna laughed. (37)

The above conversation shows that men are the authority on matters concerning sex. Men are also empowered by the fact that they pay dowry. This gives them the mandate to make women their subjects. Women also know that once bride wealth has been paid, it is a seal that they cannot leave their matrimonial homes at any point. When Janet raises the issue that Julia should separate with Kata, grandmother opposes the suggestion arguing that Julia is Kata's legal wife; "Bought and paid for completely. No one can ask her to leave her husband" (59). Yet she faces the danger of being infected by the HIV virus.

Chief Chupa has many wives but he still wants to marry Janet. Janet is the only woman who has proved to be difficult to him. "In all the years he has been a chief, he has never been so blatantly and persistently resisted by a woman" (82). He tried different methods: persuasion, threats, but Janet could not budge. In his most desperate words he tells Janet she was old and a mother of three children. She was now "mutumba, second hand clothing; a dead man's garments, that no one but the chief wanted to wear. Not that he had to - he was a good man and generous" (83).

The chief uses abusive language to Janet because he thinks he is superior by virtue of being a man. Women have been brought up in this patriarchal society and they have been made to accept their subordinate position. They have believed that it is right for them to share a husband. That is why Julia falls out with her sister Janet and unites with Monica with whom they are supposed to share a husband. Men also control economic resources in the household as well as in the public domain. Kata, a husband, a village circumciser and a traditionalist, owns the land and the livestock on his compound. His wives look upon him as the ultimate decision maker. He is the overall manager and his wives fear him. Being an ardent traditionalist he is not ready for change. He cannot discuss sexual issues with his wives. His wish is that traditional circumcision ceremony may prevail through all the ages. Though he has the authority, he lacks the ability to negotiate for safe sex. Similarly Chief Chupa has the power to convince people to use condoms, yet he is ignorant. He only thinks of marrying more wives thus increasing chances of infection.

Broker, Janet's husband, turned philanthropist, returns to Crossroads with the enthusiasm to campaign for safe sex. People in the village respect him because of his new economic status. He has enough money to support the campaign. He openly admits that he is HIV positive and he sets out to convince people to use condoms. His fearless approach to the campaign against the spread of AIDS encouraged Frank to dedicate all his time to the exercise. They are the only men who strongly supported the campaign. We can attribute their commitment to their HIV status.

The AIDS prevention method, which the author is promoting, is gender blind. Mwangi through his major character, Janet, promotes the male condom as the supreme device for preventing the spread of HIV virus. This device creates a false image that women can also use the male condom to protect themselves. It is a fact that no female can wear the male condom and most women cannot insist on its use when the male partner refuses. Men in Crossroads are not ready to use the condoms, because they feel they are 'total' men and 'total' men cannot use condoms. Chief Chupa says: "I can't use Kodom, I am the chief". The chief continues by asking Janet "Why do you want to waste your life telling people shameful things?" (82)

Men in Crossroads view condoms as untouchable things that any 'respectable' person should not be associated with. They are things that 'decent' people should not mention with their mouths. At another scene where visitors come to Crossroads to conduct a free taste; the journalists also accompany them and their aim is to film people at the condom shop. The quotation below shows the response from men:

"...I am their chief tell the white man that I can't use condom." The DO says "I am a Government man too. We are Government men here. We must not be photographed using condoms". (374)

The Government officials feel that when they use condoms their dignity would be lowered. This is an ironical reaction because it is the Government, which has hired Janet to offer sex education yet its own officials do not want to support her. Other men have different opinions about the use of condoms. Some argue that wearing a condom to have

sex is like wearing gumboots to bed, or taking a bath while fully dressed, and they insist that there is no joy at all (375). For Janet, a woman in a land of men who pride themselves as the most total men in the world, telling them to use condoms involves a lot more than mere dedication to her duty. She has to break the silences surrounding the disease and do what she ought not to have done if society remained stable. She has to teach sex education.

Due to this;

She had had to teach herself courage, to do away with the old fears and the embarrassment and to address the issues face to face, to look women in the eye and tell them the truth; that each time they slept with their husbands, they stood a good chance of getting pregnant; that babies did not come from God as they would have everyone believe; but were made by men and women, through a very specific. (138)

Janet has to dress herself with courage in order to teach people about sex education. The society calls her a shameless woman but in her answer she asserts that:

Crossroads greatest shame was allowing so many of its people to die so needlessly; in allowing embarrassment to stand in the way of truth and reality. That was the worst shame of all. And it was that shame that had decided Janet to set her own shame aside, and to utter the unutterable and to mention the unmentionable and to teach the unteachable... Taboos and traditions had to go. They had to be eliminated to make way for meaningful progress, old believes and assumptions were the biggest handicaps. In the battle against AIDS, People who

still believed that they were safe from AIDS, because they had many wives, and so called safe partners, and did not manga-manga or consort with prostitutes. But, their safe partners too had their safe partners that was a recipe for a terrible catastrophe (335-36).

Janet has to take it upon herself to fight for human life. She has to break the customs and traditions that prohibit the mention of sex in public. She has to create a sub-culture that can suit her kind of career, a culture that allows her to address sexual issues in public. As Janet struggles with her campaign against the spread of the virus by promoting the use of the male condom, a question we ask is, why did the author choose a female character to promote the male condom? Yet some men are afraid to receive condoms from a woman. Other men abuse Janet and humiliate her because they feel distributing condoms is a degrading affair.

The author overlooks the female condom, which can enhance the self-efficacy of women in their gender and sexual roles. It may also serve as a catalyst in changing the ways men and women relate to each other. This would require that beyond the women's need for a barrier method that is protective against disease and unintended pregnancies, they also be enabled to safeguard the highly valued intimacy with their partner. In addition, they also should be able to increase their power to choose and sustain actions that give them control in critical areas of their lives. Janet can promote the female condom with ease than the male condom. The ratio of women to men who have responded to sex education is high. It is indicated that:

The condom message itself was making little headway. Women were as always receptive and agreeable. They suffered the most under the burden of child bearing and rearing and had the most to lose and also to gain. (205)

Although women have accepted the condoms: the question is who is supposed to wear them? If men refuse to wear condoms, the whole process becomes futile. The campaign has been left for Janet alone. Some laugh at her, others are irritated by her moves. When Big Youth prepares posters on HIV/AIDS and hangs them on the market, Uncle Mark reads the poster, laughs and says "That business again? Will the woman ever give up?" This is a clear proof that nobody is ready to stand with Janet and campaign against the spread of the scourge. People equate HIV/AIDS to Janet. This is evident in the following sentence "They all hastened away when they heard it had all to do with Janet and her plague"(390). When Janet and her supporters put up a condom shop, we are told that the only regular customer is Highlife Atieno. She is the only one who came for her daily supply of condoms. We are not told of men who buy the condoms openly.

"Crossroads" has a way of caging women. A woman is better placed and respectable if she stays in the house and engages herself in domestic duties. Anytime she works outside the house, like Janet, she is branded new names.

The society, which comprises of both men and women, alienates her. Crossroad dwellers have misconstrued Janet; they look at her as a rebel, a deviant and a shameless woman. This is clearly illustrated in the following paragraph:

...Like most men in Crossroads, he stood in awe of Janet for her defiance of all social norms and traditions and for her reputation of not arguing with men but also insisting on winning the arguments. Had she been an old and ugly woman, her behaviour might have been more easily understandable. Had she been a barren old widow, or deformed in some manner, that too might have been mitigation enough. But Janet was young, healthy and attractive and, at her age, was expected to be fragile and subservient; like a sister or a third wife. (331)

According to the norms of society a beautiful woman should not come out abrasively and address men on issues considered secret. She should be fragile, and also a third wife. The question we ask the community is that why should a beautiful young woman be a third wife instead of a first wife? The society's sense of appreciating and rewarding beauty is gender biased. Why should a beautiful woman be fragile instead of being vibrant? Because of her deviance men hold the following views about Janet:

Some of them said that she was a vengeful sending from hell, an ireful demon sneaked out of the woman's sanatorium and sent forth into the world with the sole mission of tormenting Crossroads men to death. ...Janet was not a woman at all but an old eunuch from Mombasa, a neutered creature with empty scrotum sacks as large as the elephant udders, masquerading as a woman. They said that was the reason her husband abandoned her and ran away to Pwani with a fat prostitute. He had done so upon realising that he had married another man for a wife. What Janet needed now, they said with drunken fervour, was an ox trainer, a man to beat her back to womanhood. (68)

Men use a very offensive and abusive language against Janet because they know that society has defined different roles for men and women. As girls grow up they know that they are supposed to be submissive to their husbands, never to talk in front of men or argue with them. Their roles as girls are to take care of their husbands, give birth and rear children. This is the reason why Musa confirms the above argument that Janet needs a man to beat her and make her pregnant. It is also a general feeling of the society that women are weak; they are dependants. They cannot live successful lives alone. They need men to lean on, to provide for them shelter, food, and to control them in every aspect of their lives. When Janet proves their notions wrong by directing herself in everything, people in Crossroads feel that she is not a real woman. All these notions are brought out clearly through dialogue that Mwangi employs heavily in his narration.

On the other hand, men have been made to believe that they are the most important people in the society. They are the breadwinners; they are the people with voices to be heard by women. When a man does a wrong, it is the duty of the woman to forgive him without questioning. The woman should pretend that she has not realised the man's mistake for the sake of peace. Contrarily, when a woman does a mistake, she should be beaten because she is foolish.

Grandmother confirms these by convincing Janet to accept Broker without criticism though Broker had abandoned Janet for ten years. In addition, he comes back when he is

HIV positive and he is about to die. Grandmother justifies his disappearance by the following argument:

You will never understand men. Men were an enigma, impossibility, a curse that women were born to. Men were never happy when their life was quiet and simple. Everything about men had to be hard and complicated for them to appreciate it and to be proud of it. Everything about men had to be impossible so that they could thump their chests and boast how strong they were and how good they were at solving problems. Men were like that... "Why do you think they make wars? So that they can afterwards make peace and get praises for that too".

(178-79)

According to grandmother's argument, men like adventure and they have to be respected for that. To her, men are naturally complicated, and women should not bother trying to understand them. "Men are like that". This is a statement that gives a false justification to a wrong. She tries to convince Janet that Broker's disappearance was a kind of adventure, she should not complain, after all he has come back in a new car. Her advice to Janet is that the life of a woman is not complete without a man and, therefore Janet should not attempt to chase away Broker. She warns her:

Never try to humiliate a man, it makes them as stubborn as bulls and as hard as rocks and impossible to reason with. That is how many women end up alone, without a man. If it is revenge that you want smile... as wide as you like.

Just smile and go about your business, as if nothing bad has even happened between the two of you. (179-80)

From the passage we can deduce that it is the duty of women to respect men at all times and adore them whether they are right or wrong. Grandmother who was born and brought up in a patriarchal society believes that only men deserve respect, and they also deserve the best. As a woman you should give good services to your husband not because you want a harmonious life but because of fear of abandonment. She forgets that women also need respect because they can abandon their men. To her, a woman should never show anger; she should always pretend to be happy even if things are bad. Women have no right to argue with men or to embrace bigger visions. When Janet tells Grandmother that through her efforts Crossroads will change; Grandmother laughs and tells her "But you are only a woman, why don't you leave it to the men to do it?"

Grandmother symbolizes the past and all its values. The author brings her in the story to juxtapose the past and the present. Her main role is to counter Janet's new ideology. She is against women's independence. She knows a woman is always 'weak' and needs a man's support. She does not condone separation. Janet being a modern woman and a government employee controls her life and her small income. It is through her independence that she is able to engage in productive activities in the community. All other women are involved in reproductive chores to: give birth, cook, care for the husband and the children etc. Their husbands cannot allow them to join Janet in providing sex education. Janet is therefore trying to develop a new culture for the safety of the community. Her wishes are different from Grandmother's wishes. She wishes for

things such as: universal equity, a just society, the end to all human suffering and food in the stomachs of every child and orphan in the land (96).

Grandmother is opposed to all her efforts; she wants traditional values to prevail. At the end of the novel Grandmother is still alive, an indication that the battle between the new and the old culture continues. Due to the importance accorded to men and the roles that the society has prescribed for them, married women are proud of their husbands and they despise their fellow women who are single because society accords more respect to married women. Julia is very proud because she is not as 'helpless' as her sister who does not have a man. Nobody will ever mistake her as a prostitute. She says, "we depend on our men, we are not prostitutes"(57) .It can easily be noted that people feel single women are prostitutes. The society cannot fathom how a woman can live without a man. A single woman therefore has to struggle to prove her worth. She has to assume manly duties to convince society that she can make it on her own. Janet has to assume hard duties to prove to the society that she is worthy of the respect.

After Broker's departure, she had taken over his responsibilities at the petrol station to prove to her father that she was as good an issue as any son he could have sired. She had pumped petrol, scrubbed floors, kept books of accounts and stopped just short of overhauling diesel engines. Her determination had not impressed her father at all but it has inspired Crossroads to name her, the woman of steel, long before she became the condom woman. (70)

At one point Janet has to overlook men, she has to be abrasive to be respected. When Janet engages herself in a talk with Frank over the issue of Kata inheriting his brother's wife, Frank behaves as if he is too afraid of their customs. He also appears to be more ignorant despite the fact that he is more learned than Janet. When he indicates that he cannot talk to Kata, Janet is disgusted; in her reply she says, "you are as ignorant as all of them. Your great education has done exactly nothing to you" (72). Janet domineers the talk and later she manages to convince Frank to talk to Kata.

Frank agrees to talk to Kata, not because he is willing but because he wants to please Janet. He is portrayed as somebody who lacks a mind of his own. "But he had no idea what he was trying to do, except to please Janet while avoiding being killed by this mad man" (77).

In most of the activities that take place in the society, women have prohibitions as to where they should reach and what they should not touch. In Crossroads, circumcision ceremony is an important activity that every member of society is supposed to be involved in. Women participate in this event by cooking and singing from the periphery. They are not allowed to mix with men in the inner circle yet they are also circumcised. It is through this same activity where men meet to assert their importance that HIV is spread. Janet surprises them when she matches courageously to the inner circle to stop the activity:

The circumcision party had worked itself into frenzy when Janet arrived. Wasting no time on subtleties, she charged purposefully through the crowd to the heart of

the thing and, planting herself defiantly between Kata and the boys, ordered him to cease the primitive activity at once... Women were a taboo inside the inner circle where the boys were circumcised and Janet had no business being there at all (109).

Women in Crossroads are indeed marginalised. They have no right to own property even if it is an achievement of their own sweat. This issue is expounded when Janet receives a letter that some visitors are coming to monitor her progress about sex education. When Janet and her friends start deliberating over what Janet should ask as a reward, Big Youth suggests that Janet should request for a car. Hanna Habari is surprised and reminds them that the chief would not allow a woman to own a car in his area. This attests to the fact that women have no right to own property in Crossroads.

Mwangi also advances the argument that poverty is one of the factors that contribute to the rapid spread of the HIV virus. Women are more vulnerable especially in situations where they cannot provide for themselves the basic needs. Farida is a girl from a very poor background. She went to Mombasa with an aim of making money, which was everything in her life. She knew that with money she could rush home and build a house for her mother. She could buy clothes for her children and for the children of her brothers and sisters and send them to school. She could make her parents happy and her relatives proud of her, for once she could eat good food, and have some nice clothes and good things.

Jemina also comes from a poor family where they could not afford basic needs such as food, education, and health services among others. She decides to work at the lodging houses to bring home the money without which their fatherless children, most of them conceived in the process of earning their siblings a livelihood would not survive. Jemina worked at the Crossroads lodging for a long time before running off to Mombasa with Broker. Her intention, like that of Farida, is to make enough money then build a good house for her parents. She had a vision of improving her standard of life and that of her family. Unfortunately, the two ladies contract AIDS and die before achieving their dreams. Poverty had pushed them to become prostitutes.

It is important to note that societal laws also imprison men. Society prescribes to men what they should do and what they should not, where they should go and where they should not. In a way men also don't have freedom of choice in Crossroads. Society expects a man to be courageous enough to take risks at all times. He should go for things that most people fear. This ideology is explained in the following dialogue:

"Are you not afraid of dying?" he asked, turning to Kata

"I am a man," Kata declared. "I am not afraid of anything..."

"Not even of the plague? ... Are you aware that your brother died of AIDS?"(76)

This conversation comes up when Frank visits Kata Kataa to caution him that if he ever attempted to inherit his brother's wife, he would be infected by the plague. Kata's response is that he is a man. Society has given him a false courage, a courage that leads to his detriment. Men are always worried over what other people say about them. When

Faru, an old teacher in the village, pays a visit to Janet; she offers to prepare a cup of cocoa for him. The old teacher becomes anxious and wonders what people would think of him:

Reluctantly, he leaned his bicycle on the wall of the grainstore and sat down on the stool previously occupied by Frank. He sat uncomfortably for a moment, wondered what people would say if they saw him, a respectable school head, having cocoa with Janet at her house. What would his wife say? And the PTA? What would the board have to say about that? He rose abruptly, moved the stool away from the direct view of the gate and sat down again. (333-4)

Faru's desire is to visit Janet and have a discussion with her but he is too preoccupied with what other people would say about him. One, he is a respectable teacher in the village yet he is visiting a single woman, worse of all, a woman who does a 'shameful' job of distributing condoms. Single women are associated with loose morals and therefore his wife would think that he has gone to seduce her. Two 'real' men never used condoms so when other men see him at Janet's place, they might think he had gone for condoms and this would water down his dignity as a man. Three, the PTA and the board would think that he has gone to negotiate with Janet so that Janet can go to their school and teach sex education to pupils, something that they had refused because sex education 'corrupts' the morals of the youth. All these fears make Faru very uncomfortable. The society cannot allow him to lead his own life. They have set standards for him an elite in the village. This proves the fact that societal laws also cage men. It is this fear that prohibits the free sharing of ideas that creates a loophole for the rabbit spread of the HIV

virus. Mwangi implies that, this is a weakness that should not be encouraged in a society that has been infected by HIV/AIDS. He does this by vividly describing Faru `s state and making him emerge as a caged man, whose life is being Controlled by a supper power.

Summary

This chapter has dealt with gender issues in a society that has been affected by the AIDS scourge. Crossroads is a patriarchal society, a society that has empowered men in all aspects of their lives. Women hold a second position in this community. Mwangi employs two major stylistic devices to advance his argument: dialogue and description.

Recognition that gender approaches are valid to HIV/AIDS prevention calls for investigations into distribution of power between the sexes that permits women to lead self directed lives. Women should be able to discuss sexual matters with their husbands. In Crossroads women have no right to discuss such matters with their partners as they would be thought to be seducing men, an act which is primarily meant for men. Though they are receptive to the male condoms their husbands cannot wear them. Yet they are allowed to have many wives. Although chances of getting infected are very high, the woman has no means to protect herself.

This requires the promotion of the female condom, an issue that the author has avoided. Research has proved that the female condom is very effective. It can change the ways

men and women relate to each other. In most cases when women ask their partners to wear condoms, they feel that their wives (sexual partners) either do not love them, or they do not trust them. The promotion of the female condom would be a form of empowering women.

A single woman has to struggle to prove her worth in society. Janet has to assume manly roles, anything she does, they comment that she does it just like a man. When she rides the bicycle, men say she is so shameless; she rides it like a man. Such attitudes strain a woman's effort. As a result, she always feels that for her to be recognised she has to do that which a man has always done.

The society needs to change its cultures and its attitude towards women so that both sexes can work together to curb the virus. New cultures have to emerge to give women a chance to say no to a practice that endangers their lives. A culture that sex education can be discussed freely among the adults and the youths, a new community that works together with the HIV victims.

Poverty has also been singled out as a factor that promotes the spread of the HIV virus. In cases where women are not able to provide for themselves basic needs, they turn to prostitution and in the process they contract the disease, which eventually leads to their death.

Women demand respect, men adoration, youth recognition and children care. AIDS demand openness and faithfulness. Condoms may sound too obscene to be mentioned, but AIDS remains a threat. The sound of a woman distributing condoms may seem weak, unreal, unauthoritative, but AIDS is real. Both men and women have to fight it.

The next chapter discusses HIV/AIDS and social integration. Characters who are HIV positive are discussed in relation to their social status in society.

CHAPTER FOUR

HIV/AIDS and Social Integration

Between me and the other world there is ever unasked question; unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then instead of saying directly, 'How does it feel to be a problem?' They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town, or I fought at Mechanicville... To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (213)

These are the words of W.E. Dubois, a black American who experienced discrimination together with his kind. They are denied their rights, not because of being criminals, but because of their colour. Dubois further makes a landmark statement "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of colour line". In the same frame, today, we can declare that the problem of the twenty first century is the problem of HIV/AIDS.

To be HIV positive in the contemporary society is isolating in itself. Most people do not know about it and are afraid of the virus. Some people imagine that living near someone with an HIV would make them contract the disease. Friends and family members may abandon someone who has the HIV virus. Co-workers may not want to work with a person who has the virus. Employers may not employ HIV positive persons. Socially, most people do not like associating with HIV/AIDS victims. Some people consider HIV victims to be problems and others look at them with questions better not asked; how did

you contract the disease? Racial discrimination and HIV/AIDS are issues the world should fight today.

Social integration is a compound word formed from two roots: Social and integrate. According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, "social" is an adjective that describes the relations between people and communities. To integrate is to become or make somebody become fully a member of a community rather than remaining in a separate group.

The author presents us with two characters who are victims of HIV/AIDS. Frank has the virus that has not yet developed into AIDS. Broker has AIDS and is counting his days to the grave. This chapter examines the social lives of the two characters, their contribution to the society.

On opening the text, the two characters are absent. An air of desolation hits the readers. We meet a despondent old man in front of a teahouse. "The old man stepped off the veranda of the teahouse, walked heavily to the middle of the road and stood looking up and down the rugged street"(1). The crumbling buildings, the vandalized telephone booths, the decimation of people are the reasons to the heavy steps made by the old man. He considers the dying Crossroads to be his home yet he has little to do to restore its old nature. The second old man we meet is also lonely. He plays the game of draughts alone. While the former has completely lost hope, the latter still vacillates between fear and hope.

The artist vividly describes the market place, which is the only home for the two old men.

At the far end of the once lively thoroughfare, the petrol station lay bare and vandalized. The dead and broken street lay like a crushed and rotting python between the barred post office and the collapsed petrol station, the *mobil* winged horse, once a sign of hope and promise of salvation, hovered uncertainly in the air and leaned precariously over the empty street. Two white minarets, all that was left of the old mosque, jutted out of the ruins of the old town; two skeletal fingers pointing skywards in a chilling ominous gesture. (8)

The above description of Crossroads market emits a lifeless air that raises questions in the reader. Are there other people in Crossroads? How do they relate? How do they communicate? The pitiable and desolate imagery of the two old men also signal the reader that all is not well. It is to this lifeless society that Frank Fundi returns to join the two old men. The community had contributed money for him to go abroad and further his studies. He comes back to Crossroads when he is twenty-seven years old -- full of compunction. His grim appearance attests to the fact that he is a hopeless young man.

He stood still, eyes closed and held his breath, until the dust raised by the bus had settled. Then he picked up his cardboard suitcase from the ditch, where the conductor had dumped it and dusted it. It was a simple and ordinary case and it contained all his worldly possessions, three dog-eared books, two changes of clothes and a spare pair of shoes. That was all that Frank Fundi brought back to Crossroads after many years of absence. (24)

Although Frank emerges as an object of pity, there are questions from the community that cannot be gainsaid. The community, as well as the reader is eager to know why he has come back? How he spent their money? Mzee Musa asks Frank:

"When did you finish school?"

" I did not," Frank said.

"Why?" Musa wanted to know.

"It is a long story," he told him. (Mwangi 27)

The answer that Frank gives creates tension, which heightens suspense as the novel progresses. The society as well as the reader would like to hear the long story that precluded his studies. The promised long story is never told. He remains silent about his past life (the period he was away). The silence is nagging, it propels the reader to read on and to weave together small evidences in order to make a story of what Frank did with the money raised by the community to enable him to further his studies. "In Pwani, where life generally cost a lot more than it was worth, Frank had stayed in grander places and paid less for bed and breakfast"(51). The short exchange between Frank and Musa over the cost of the room makes Frank to leak out some information of where he spent his life when he left Crossroads. Although he does not expound on his past life, we can surmise that he led a reckless life and squandered the money that was meant for his studies. It is germane to add that it is through this lifestyle that he contracted the HIV virus. " But life had not been kind to him at all and had forced him to use the scholarship money for other purposes, which he could not go into right away "(46).

We suppose he lost his friends when he finished his money. He was deserted. A nostalgic feeling intrigued him to return home where he could still be recognised and be appreciated...

"You do not know what you have come home to son of Mateo," she told him. At mention of his old name, a warm feeling came over Frank." It is good to be home again," he said to her. To be somebody and to be the son of somebody. To be noticed and to be recognised and remembered. That was something to come home to. (48)

Frank's intention to reunite with his family was not possible. Their home had been turned into an orphanage. "They slept in the empty grain store and in the empty goat house and on the beds and under the beds and everywhere where there was space to lie down to sleep"(47). Their home is no longer a "home". It cannot accommodate him. Amidst all this, Frank has a plan for his life. He builds an animal clinic, which he names "Frank Animal Clinic". He uses his skills to treat animals in the village. Despite the fact that the community is aware of Frank's HIV status, they do not discriminate him. They readily accept him and appreciate his services. Things changed when Frank joined Janet in providing sex education, a topic the community is against.

It all started when Janet stormed at a circumcision ceremony and demanded for the abrogation of the activity. Frank infuriated the circumciser by taking Janet's side. The circumciser threatened to cut him thus inciting the youth to catch him. The boys chased Frank farther than they had expected, but they did not catch him. Frank was exhausted.

Frank's lungs were bursting from the exertion. His legs were shaking and his entire body was on fire. He ducked in a bush and lay gasping for breath. (113)

This is the beginning of Frank's problems. Kata Kataa collaborated with the village Chief and together they kept Frank under constant surveillance. Frank was arrested from time to time and accused of corrupting the morals of the youth. One day they came for him at dawn, armed as if they were going for war:

They tore down the door of his room, hustled him out of the back of the teahouse and bundled him into the boot of the police car for the bumpy drive to the police station at Sokoni... They were kicking him, and punching him; knocking him about without mercy. (154-55)

The physical torture and the humiliation that Frank undergoes discourages his stay in Crossroads. He decides to flee but on Janet's advice, he reconsiders his decision and remains in Crossroads. He changes his mind and braces himself to face the challenges that come his way. He decides to fully support Janet and they work together to provide sex education.

It is imperative to note that Frank, albeit of his HIV status, is optimistic in life. The animal clinic he opens is a symbol of life. He stocks the medicine, which he uses to save the endangered lives of the animals. His main mission is to save life. After the demolition of his kiosk, he becomes keener with human life than animal life. There is no moment Frank sits down to muse over his HIV status. He is always busy discussing with

Janet new strategies they should employ in order to convince the community to accept sex education. Towards the end of the novel, the community starts to yield to sex education. Schools also allow them to teach the pupils. Despite his HIV status, Frank contributes positively to the well being of the society. Before his arrival, nobody had ever assisted Janet, not even to balance the condom boxes on the bicycle. It is ironical in that HIV negative people like Kata are the ones who work towards the destruction of life. He organizes a gang that pulls down Frank's animal clinic.

The other character whom we can examine closely is Bakari Ben Broker, Janet's husband. He marries Janet when she is only sixteen years old. He sells eggs, and later Janet's father employs him in his petrol station. This is where he stole money and ran off to Mombasa with a prostitute, abandoning Janet at the age of nineteen with three children to bring up.

Broker's name is just mentioned in passing in the beginning of the novel. Little is known about him till his return. When Broker returns to Crossroads, everything has changed. He cannot locate his way easily to his former home. The difficulty he encounters in tracing his former home proves the fact that he had completely forgotten his home, wife and children. We are told that Broker had disappeared from Crossroads for over ten years. When he appears nobody recognises him-- he is a grotesque indeed.

They had expected to see an opulent, middle aged man, robust of character and forceful of nature, in keeping with the status of the vehicle. What they saw was one emaciated, old creature of indeterminable age, with a shiny, bony forehead,

thinning brown hair, large ears and eyes that were about to disappear back to their carvenous sockets. (164)

Janet does not recognize Broker until he introduces himself. This revelation arouses ambivalent feelings within Janet. Her first reaction was to hit him as an act of revenge for abandoning her. His appearance instilled pain in Janet; the pain felt when somebody pierces a knife in a raw wound. She also feels nervous for she remembered how Broker used to batter her. She cannot welcome him.

Grandmother also fails to recognise Broker. She cynically looks at the weary man demanding to know who he is. Discovering that the emaciated man is Broker, Janet's husband, grandmother is filled with joy. She knows Janet now has a man, who will care for her, and provide her with all her needs. She commands Janet to welcome her husband and make him happy, she advises her to forget the past and embrace him.

It is rather unfortunate for him for Janet has changed. She is not the timid teenager that he had left behind. Janet is now a full-grown woman, exposed to sex education and a village educationist. Looking at Broker, she does not need to be told that he is suffering from AIDS -- she knows it. Therefore, she is not ready for the reunion.

Broker tries by all means to convince Janet to allow him to spend a night in her house but she refuses. He threatens her, he persuades her but Janet does not bulge. This act reveals to the reader, Janet's level of maturity, her awareness of the HIV virus hence her

independence. Broker turns away and later finds a room at Mzee Musa's place, which he occupies.

It is after his return that we discover that Broker was a dishonest man. He was an inveterate liar. He had run away to Mombasa without paying his debts. He had not paid Musa the last time he cut his hair. He also took teacher Faru's eggs without paying. Broker, however is now changed. Money is no longer a problem to him. He pays his debts without rancour.

His efforts to reunite with Janet are fruitless. Though he is jealous about her relationship with Frank, he could do nothing about it. He later realises that the only way he could move closer to her is to support her mission. He joins Janet's campaign with new ideas of selling condoms. He convinces Janet that people can only condoms if they spend their money to buy them. This is a relief to Janet, because Broker takes full charge of the condoms while she and Frank travel to different places to teach people about AIDS. Many people do not welcome the idea of buying condoms but Broker convinces them buy. Eventually, they build a condom shop and anyone who is in need of condoms, can buy them from a central place.

Broker greatly supports Janet when a team to inspect her work arrives in Crossroads. He becomes the chief spokesman, providing answers to all questions. When the journalist asks him why he needs condoms, he replies:

"I'm HIV positive", Broker said to him.

"But I'm sexually very active, so I must protect my partner. I love my partner very much and I would hate to be the cause of her death. You see what most people do not understand is that it is possible to live a normal and reasonably active sex life with AIDS. But one must take the necessary precautions not to infect others with the AIDS virus."(374)

Broker does not hide his HIV status. He talks about it openly. He even castigates the cultural and social dimensions that prevent the spread of sex education. He also talks about people's ignorance and illiteracy that make the community impossible to understand AIDS (375). His deeds and answers impresses the journalists and they leave knowing that Janet has a good assistant.

Broker's withdrawal to live in a rental house and his total support to Janet's activities portrays Broker as a very liberated man. In a patriarchal setting, the home belongs to a man and a woman is just part of the man's property. Whether he is present or absent, he remains in authority. We could have expected Broker to force his reunion with Janet but he does not. He acknowledges the fact that they can still stay apart and work together for the common good of the society. He understands why they should no longer live as husband and wife. He knows he is about to die and he does not want to be a burden to her, neither does he want to infect her.

Being certain of his death, Broker actively embarks on charitable activities. He advises Musa to repaint his teahouse with whitewash. He then tells him to improve on his menu.

The shining teahouse together with the new condom shop is the beginning of Crossroads revival. To encourage more optimism he buys the old petrol station then goes to Makutano to buy gifts for his family, his friends and the orphans. He also buys plans and drawings for the petrol station and the orphanage he intends to build. His focus shifts towards development. From that day hence forth, Broker is fully engaged in managing his projects. The church is repaired too.

The weaker he grows, the friendlier he becomes. Anytime death crosses his mind, he replaces it with development plans. After his projects have picked up, he turns to amend his spiritual life. He confesses to the pastor the sins he had committed.

His gods', until recently, had been money and sexual gratification. The truth as he had told the pastor, was that he had never been a good man. (405)

His journey to the hills with the children is a way of reconciling with them for the long period he had abandoned them. The trip also brings the two victims, Broker and Frank, together thus enabling them to discuss their situations freely. Frank reveals to Broker that he had used the scholarship money to pay for the HIV tests. Broker also explains to Frank how he had survived in Pwani after he had tested HIV positive.

He had joined a support group in Pwani, a group of people like him, whose social status, expectations and outlook on life had been changed forever by HIV. With them he had the peace he needed in which to pull himself together. With them he had found that he could talk, laugh and even cry without fear or embarrassment. (404)

Due to the encouragement he had received from the support group, Broker managed to live with the virus for eight years. Though Broker had loathed Frank's relationship with Janet at the beginning, it is evident that he is no longer bitter with him. He unfolds his plans to him and requests him to take charge of the projects when he dies. He also requests him to convince Janet to accept his bank documents so as to secure a future for his children. Their picnic with the children end amicably. It is therefore, clear that the two friends harbour no bitter feelings towards each other.

We also note that Janet had become inured to Broker's presence. She becomes more caring and sympathises with his deteriorating health. At one point, she is so moved that she invites Broker to her house "There is room in my house now... The condoms are in the shop now" Broker considers her wish, but since he had resolved never to be an object of pity, he declines the offer but accepts her request to wash his clothes, for this was something his other women had refused to do for him.

None of his other women would do his laundry, he told her. They had all simply vanished once they learned he was ill with AIDS. They would not greet him in the street, in case their new boyfriends found out that they had had anything to do with him. (353)

Broker lived in two different communities after he had contracted the virus. In the first community where he got the virus he was completely ostracized. He experienced what I can call "AIDS discrimination." Friends deserted him, none of his women friends

associated with him. His social life suddenly changed, he had to look for new friends who shared the same kind of discrimination. When his condition exacerbated, a nostalgic melancholy engulfed him. He had to return home, to Crossroads where he was born and bred.

Crossroads is Broker's second community after he had fallen ill. His return to this community surprises many. His physical appearance tells it all. He is on his way to an eternal rest. AIDS has finished him. The much money he has cannot buy him cure. Despite his grotesque appearance, Crossroads does not discriminate him. They integrate him in the society. He works with them and plays with them as one of their own. They enjoy his company and consult him on various issues that need clarification.

Just before Broker dies, he takes Janet back to the hills, a place where they used to go during their courting period, a place where their first born was conceived. This is a very important retreat for it marks the reconciliation of the two. They remember the good times they had together. Their conversation is full of love and hope.

"I'm sorry I wasted your time," he said to her.

"You deserved greater happiness than I could ever give you."

"I was once happy with you too," she said to him.

"Really happy?"

"Really, really happy."(444)

This is the time the two characters travel back in their minds to remember the most exciting episodes in their lives. Janet remembers their wedding day. A day Broker had carried her home on a borrowed bicycle. He stopped everywhere to show her off to people and, more so, to spite her father Maalim Juma who was against their marriage. That was the day both of them had been extremely happy but now they have to say goodbye to each other. This is the last meeting Broker has with Janet before his death.

Before his death, Broker manages to make most people happy. He reconciles first with his God and with everyone else he has wronged. He pays all his debts and accomplishes his projects. He leaves the Church in good condition; the petrol station in operation and the orphanage had also started functioning. He assigns duties to various people to oversee the projects after his death. He dies a "free" and "happy" man receiving an honourable death.

Summary

This chapter has examined the social lives of the two characters, Frank and Broker. We have discovered that Frank used the scholarship money for his HIV tests. He had returned to Crossroads with no intention of revealing it to anyone.

So he returned to Crossroads. He had come back determined to hide the truth, to his fear of pain and of death. But everyone had soon found out, sooner than he could have told them, had he had the courage to. (404)

The community is appalled by Frank's return, having used their money not for studies as it was intended but on his own private life. From the reaction of people like Kata Kataa who had contributed immensely towards his studies, we can infer that they have forgiven him. They accept him and interact with him like one of their own. He only runs into problems when he starts supporting Janet in providing sex education. He suffers physical injuries due to the subsequent arrests, yet he does not give up the campaign. Later, the authorities allow them to teach people about AIDS. On this note, Frank leads a normal life like any other person. His duty is to treat animals and teach people about sex education. His main role is to provide AIDS awareness to the community thus lifting the community from ignorance.

Broker returns to Crossroads when he is very rich. He has a vision of reviving Crossroads. He is a hope for the hopeless people especially the orphans. He is also accepted in the community and he dies after he has accomplished his dreams. The Church is repaired, the orphanage is constructed and the orphans are rehabilitated and finally the petrol station starts operating. He dies a changed man, a man who has discovered a different purpose of life. He says "But it seems to me that to live honestly and decently, and live well, is a good enough purpose."(433)

From the treatment of the two characters we can infer that Mwangi has a dream for a new society where people are not discriminated due to their HIV status. A society that will integrate AIDS victims, listen to them, work with them, eat with them, and above all care for them. This is evident in the novel in that Frank and Broker are socially integrated in

the community. He is also looking forward to a society that will break all the myths, the silences, and the taboos that surround HIV/AIDS. A society with a new culture that openly teaches its members about sex education and new customs that can accommodate the victims.

To the AIDS victims, Mwangi has a message too -- acceptance. Once AIDS victims accept their HIV status they will find themselves with more energy and a new will to live. They will contribute positively to society, for they will live a normal life. He is also advising the AIDS victims to prepare for their death, knowing that the disease has no cure. As a way of preparation, they should first let their families know about their HIV status, so that they do not waste the available family resources trying to discover the problem with them. This is evident in the relationship between Janet and Broker. When Janet insisted that she had to take Broker to hospital, he replied: "Don't waste your time," "I can confirm to you, with absolute authority, that this thing is incurable."(427) The victims should also consolidate their properties and let them be known to their families. They should delegate duties while they are still alive the same way Broker did before his death. They should plan for their short time and use it for the benefit of their families and the society as a whole. They should channel their resources to more profitable projects and never waste them on frivolous activities. Broker prepares for his death and instils hope in the hopeless people of his society.

The writer is also implying that the two characters contracted the disease through promiscuity. He is, therefore, advising people to either use condoms or abstain from sex

like Janet. Janet did not engage in any sexual relationship since the day that Broker abandoned her.

Mwangi is also yearning for a society that will recognize and listen to the voice of a woman, a society that will not vilify women when they engage in activities that can change society, a society where women will not be pushed to the kitchen when meaningful issues are being discussed at a "baraza". Janet addressed men in different sittings. Despite the humiliation she faced, she did not give up, she pressed on until they listened to her. Mwangi is also implying that the existing customs are so strong that they need a strong willed person like Janet to surmount them.

The novel ends optimistically. The village has been renovated and Broker has reconciled with his God, his wife and children. There is a new beginning hence the hope for a changed society. It is true that the problem of the twenty first century is the problem of HIV/AIDS, but people have to remain optimistic.

CONCLUSION

This study has analysed the treatment of the theme of HIV/AIDS as depicted in Meja Mwangi's novel The Last Plague. Through his powerful description the author presents to us the social economic effects of HIV/AIDS on society. Economically, the disease is killing productive people, and as a result businesses have collapsed. Academically, most children cannot afford education due to the demise of their parents and guardians. Socially the disease has threatened the cultural values that have always bound people together. The affected have always remained psychologically tortured with the overwhelming responsibilities that have been left in their hands.

The study has revealed that sex is a taboo topic in crossroads. The elders feel that by teaching the youth about sex education, Frank and Janet are corrupting the morals of the youth. Mwangi artistically breaks the curtains that have enclosed sexual matters by foregrounding the use of condoms, which the society regards abominable. Through Janet, the condom message has reached almost everybody in crossroads. The artist also illuminates abstinence as a sure way of avoiding the virus. Janet abstained from sex since the day Broker abandoned her. Mzee Musa has never married; probably he has never had sex. Uncle Mark, though financially endowed, restrains himself from rampant sexual hires. He is referred to as a "retired survivor". This explains why they remain healthy and watch crossroads "die."

It is clear that poverty is also a cause to the spread of the virus. Young women like Jemina and Farida embark on prostitution as the only way they can earn their living. As a result, they contract the virus and die without accomplishing their dreams.

Critics have pointed out that in Mwangi's early works heroes have no message to the world. In this novel we have agreed that the main characters do have a message. Broker, one of the characters, has a message to the readers. He openly declares his HIV status and systematically plans for his finances before his death. In our literature review, we point out that Mwangi's female characters have always been depicted negatively, as prostitutes, animals, dogs and so on. Hardly do they engage in productive activities. They only exist on prostitution money, always hunting for men. They are just objects from which men derive their pleasure. The heroine, Janet, in The Last Plague, has been redeemed. Janet, an abandoned woman, refuses to succumb to the seduction of men. She sticks to her job of distributing condoms and manages her own affairs.

At the end of the novel old people are yielding to the use of condoms. People living with AIDS have been integrated in society and they have proved to be very productive. These events bring out Mwangi's vision. He sees a new society that will not stigmatise people living with AIDS. The Last Plague is a novel that is rich in content and style. This study has been concerned with the content and it is aimed at exciting a further critical appreciation of the novel especially its stylistic correspondence.

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