RENARRATING THE KENYAN NATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THIRD-GENERATION KENYAN FICTION

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DECLARATION AND APPROVAL

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my original work and has not been presented for the conferment of a degree or award of a diploma in this or any other institution.

Signature…… Date……..

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APPROVAL

This thesis has been submitted with our approval as the university supervisors.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is gladly dedicated to my beloved, caring mother Esther Kerubo Mogoki who at the moment is dancing with the angels in heaven.

In the same breath, I also dedicate this thesis to my diligent, 'strict' and focused father, Samwel Monyenche Mogoki who played his key role as a father very well by ensuring that his children acquired formal education to any level of their desire. The two departed and memorable souls will live in me now and forever. They gave a perfect definition to my life.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the literary concerns of Third-generation Kenyan authors, positioning their works as a thematic and stylistic departure from first- and Second-generation writers. While earlier generations focused largely on corruption, postcolonial disillusionment, and the stagnation of national development, this study explored how contemporary authors articulate the evolving notion of Kenyan nationhood. The research was motivated by the relative scarcity of critical scholarship on this emerging generation of writers whose works mirror Kenya's shifting political, cultural, and social realities. The analysis focused on three selected novels: *Of Pawns and Players* (2018) by Kinyanjui Kombani, *Nairobi Heat* (2009) by Mukoma wa Ngugi, and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. The objectives were to explore how these writers re-narrate contemporary issues affecting the nation, to examine the nature of language employed in engaging with the Kenyan nation, and to analyze the narrative techniques used to depict the complexities of national identity. The study was guided by three research questions: What issues are re-narrated in the texts? How is language used to address the Kenyan nation? Which narrative techniques are employed to represent the nation's complexities? The study adopted narratology as its principal theoretical framework, drawing on Roland Barthes' (1977) structural semiotics and Prince's (1988) postclassical narratology to analyze narrative structure, language, and technique. A qualitative methodology was employed, with primary data drawn from the novels and secondary data from critical literature on Kenya's socio-political context. Data were examined through content analysis, and findings were presented discursively. The analysis revealed that the selected authors foreground pressing contemporary issues such as identity crises, systemic crime and corruption, shifting gender dynamics, and the impact of technology and social media on public discourse. The study also found out that language functions as both a stylistic and ideological tool, blending diverse registers that reflect Kenya's multilingual and class-divided society. The study findings contribute to African literary scholarship by mapping the changing contours of Kenyan fiction and demonstrating how contemporary narratives reflect, critique, and shape national consciousness.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION AND APPROVAL ii

COPYRIGHT iii

DEDICATION iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT v

ABSTRACT vi

TABLE OF CONTENTS vii

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS x

CHAPTER ONE 1

INTRODUCTION 1

1.1 Overview 1

1.2 Background of the Study 1

1.3 Statement of the Problem 9

1.4 Purpose of the Study 9

1.5 Objectives of the Study 9

1.6 Research questions 10

1.7 Scope and limitations of the Study 10

1.8 Justification of the Study 11

1.9 Literature Review 12

1.10 Theoretical Framework 18

1.11 Research Methodology 22

1.11.1 Research Design 22

1.11.2 Sample and Sampling Procedures 23

1.11.3 Data Collection Procedures 23

1.11.4 Data Analysis and Presentation 24

1.11.5 Ethical Considerations 25

CHAPTER TWO 27

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES DEPICTED BY THE THIRD-GENERATION AUTHORS IN RENARRATING THE KENYAN NATION 27

2.1 Introduction 27

2.2 Identity crisis 27

2.3 Crime and Corruption 42

2.4 Gender Relations in Third-Generation Kenyan Fiction 49

2.5 Technology and Social Media in Third-Generation Kenyan Fiction 61
2.6 Conclusion 67
CHAPTER THREE 69
LANGUAGE USED IN RE-NARRATING THE KENYAN NATION 69
3.1 Introduction 69
3.2 Different language registers for different social classes 69
3.3 Language, Identity, and the Postcolonial State 80
3.4 Naming and Labelling of the State and its Institutions 90
3.5 Conclusion 107
CHAPTER FOUR 110
TECHNIQUES OF NARRATION IN THE SELECTED THIRD-GENERATION WORKS OF FICTION 110
4. 1 Introduction 110
4.2 Point of view 110
4.3 Narrative voice 116
4.4 Temporal structure 120
4.5 Binary oppositions 128
4.6 Satirical and Politically Loaded language: Doublespeak and the Kenyan Nation 140
4.7 Language loaded in Stylistic Hybridity and the Global-Local Tension 148
4.8 Conclusion 158
CHAPTER FIVE 160
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 160
5.1 Overview 160
5.2 Summary of findings 160
5.3 Conclusion 161
5.4 Recommendations 162
5.5 Suggestions for further research 163
REFERENCES 165
APPENDICES……..……174
APPENDIX I: BGS APPROVSL FOR FIELD WORK……..……...175
APPENDIX II: RESEARCH PERMIT NACOSTI……176
APPENDIX III: PUBLICATION…….……..177

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

Culture denotes the set of social practices, beliefs, values and artistic expressions that shake Kenyan identity and are reflected in literary representation.

Kenyan nationhood is used to denote the sense of collective identity, belonging, and shared consciousness that emerges from Kenya's historical, political, and cultural evolution. Within this study, it refers to how third-generation Kenyan writers imagine, question, and reconstruct the idea of Kenya as a unified or fragmented nation through their narratives. The country's geographical boundaries are hereby used to define Kenya.

Language ambiguity refers to the deliberate or unintentional use of linguistic expressions that convey multiple meanings or interpretations. It is examined as a stylistic and ideological tool through which authors navigate issues of identity, power, and representation in the Kenyan context.

Language use denotes the choices of diction, code-switching, idiomatic expressions, and narrative voice employed by third-generation Kenyan writers. The study views language use as a medium through which authors articulate national consciousness, cultural hybridity, and postcolonial realities.

Nation the purpose of this study, *nation* refers to a structured and autonomous community inhabiting a particular geographical region defined by shared governance, laws, and collective identity. In the literary sense, it is understood as both a political construct and a narrative idea continually reimagined through fiction.

Re-narration in this study refers to the literary act of retelling, reconstructing, or reinterpreting the story of the Kenyan nation through new narrative forms, perspectives,

and voices. It implies a re-examination of established national discourses and the articulation of alternative visions of Kenya's identity and future.

Techniques of narration refer to the stylistic techniques employed by the authors in their narrations. All the available modules of narration contained in the three selected texts will be exploited to the maximum.

Third-generation fiction refers to post-independent literary writing in which there is a major shift in both the method of publishing and the themes explored. They are influenced by the Western world and are concerned with international politics and the world and mostly published at the turn of the millennium.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This chapter presents the background of the study which briefly explores the key developments in first and second-generation literary works so as to set the base for the analysis of the selected three third-generation literary texts. It also presents the problem statement, objectives of the study, the significance and justification of the study, the scope and limitation of the study, and the theory guiding the study. It ends with a presentation of a review of literature as well as the research methodology used in order to attain the objectives of the study.

1.2 Background of the Study

Examining the literature of a nation denotes examining not only the social and cultural, but most importantly the political aspects. Anderson (1991, p.6) asserts that the nations are "imagined communities that are artificially constructed and sustained and are not deeply rooted in History or natural cultural identity." The notion of nation takes into consideration of the diverse cultures within the various peoples who inhabit specific geographical boundaries and do identify as belonging to a common imagined entity.

The question of nation in literature has been a subject of interest to various scholars especially the first-generation African writers whose works were published when African nations were attaining independence hence earning the title of nation. Ogude (1999) observes that Ngugi and his generation regarded themselves as creators of the

nation. Ogude further adds that it is the selected material from the culture of a specific people and events in history provides material for literary works.

While African literature has been known to involve various registers of Africaness, Kenyan-African literature is known for the identity, language and belonging of Kenyan people. It is a fact that in all ages and genres, all literary works address the happenings in human society hence the consensus that writers do not write in a vacuum (Ngugi 1981, Achebe, 1964). What is important about language, identity and trope of development goes beyond the idea of Kenyan literature, but to the realm of the special and historical materiality of the Kenyan situation. A rubric is formed intentionally that situates the idea of Kenyan language and identity within a narrative of independence and uniqueness. There must be a line that connects the refusal of language with the notion of identity and what that carries.

Therefore, it would be apt to assert that literary writers have a great responsibility towards addressing issues affecting society. Achebe (1975) stresses that a serious writer should have a sense of responsibility to enhance the quality of humanity by way of exposing all man-made suppression and oppression in society. Various scholars including Mphalele (1982) and Larson (2007) have penned their opinions and agree that the writer's commitment is to their society or a particular community that the writer chooses to address in a work. Tailor (2011) summarizes the consensus about the role of the writer in their society.

The writer's environment constitutes a major determining factor that influences what and to whom he/she writes. Okiche (2018) outlines the different phases of African

literature which include the pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial stages which have significantly influenced the themes and styles of African writers. In discussing the works of the three generations of writers in the African continent, this far, Clit (2009) posits that the tag "generation" be used for textual development instead of authorial development such that older writers who construct works that fall under the new body of writing unique to third-generation writers is not locked out based on the author's age.

First-generation writers in Africa, the likes of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Leopold Sedar Senghor, and Wole Soyinka among others addressed issues that emanated from the after effects of the arrival of the colonizers and missionaries. The 20th Century landscape was different from the present in terms of political and social happenings of various societies. Still given that "Africa is a geographical, political and socio-cultural entity", as Ojaide (2012, p.4) explains, writers from different parts of the continent address issues specific to their regions for example, South African writers addressed apartheid that was unique to South Africa. Likewise, Francophone writers addressed issues that emanated from the colonial ideologies of the French that saw the Negritude writers counter the European notions of Africans as inferior by extolling pride in blackness.

Ojaide (2012) averts that the first-generation of writers spoke their mother tongue before learning foreign European languages. Therefore, once they began writing in English, for example, they tended to infuse it with their native languages. He cites examples of Yoruba in Wole Soyinka's works, Kikuyu in Ngugi's artistic works and Igbo in Chinua

Achebe's works. Irele (1981) observes that this infusion of African idioms in these European languages was an effort to achieve a formal correspondence between the writer's African experience and the European languages. She adds that language, after all, carries the thought and experiences of a people.

For these first-generation writers, writing after the departure of the colonialists, the nation became very central in the identity formations of the natives, the African people. Nations had been formed to replace kingdoms and ethnic groups resulting in regroupings of people lumped together for their political and economic benefit (Ojaide,2012). Writers during the period after independenceattacked the colonizers' exploitation of the continent, both Francophone and Anglophone Africa.

After independence, Africans believed that their ability to govern themselves would bring about development and end suffering, but then the oppression and social injustices experienced during colonialism persisted. This disillusionment is well presented in Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Ayei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born* published in 1966 and 1968 respectively. Another major concern in the works of the First-generation of African writers is the clash between Western culture and African traditions as well as Christianity and African beliefs. Examples of literary works centred on these two themes are Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* published in 1975 and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* published in 1958. Wole Soyinka's text, a play based on a real event that happened in Oya City in Yoruba land in 1946, revolves around a conflict between the natives and the British colonial administrators. On the other hand, Okonkwo, the main character in Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, kills himself because

of his inability to adapt to the new society following his helplessness upon realizing that he had failed both his people and *Ani*, their goddess.

The Second-generation authors, the likes of Margaret Ogola, Marjorie Oludhe, Grace Ogot, Miriam Were, David Maillu, Ama Ata Aidoo and Flora Nwapa who published mostly in the late nineteen seventies, eighties and nineties addressed issues to do with neocolonialism (persistent oppression of Africans by fellow Africans), corruption and governance issues, crime and the effects of rural-urban migration among others. Writers from the first-generation continued to write during this period and their novels reflected the realities of the time. Achebe's *Anthills of the Savanna* and Ngugi's *The River Between* are examples of works by first-generation writers that carried themes addressed by second-generation writers. Ojaide (2012) points out that this was the period that saw *coups* and *counter-coups* that brought military dictators to power. The period also explored themes related to cultural clashes between Christianity and African Traditions as exemplified by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and Macgoye's *Coming to Birth.*

The seventies witnessed the emergence of female writers in Africa to lend their voices to the issues that directly affect the lives of women. Taiwo (1984) observes that the letter motif of issues addressed by these female writers include education, marriage, religion, childlessness in marriage, polygamy, war, slavery and the clash between modern and traditional beliefs. Buchi Emechata's *The Joys of Motherhood* published in 1979 explores the treatment of childless women in a patriarchal society that values the birth of boys over girls. Mariam Ba's *So Long a Letter* published in 1979 explores women's

rights and the oppression of women by patriarchy and religion, in this case, Islam. Margaret Ogolla's *The River and the Source* published in 1995 addresses among other issues the emancipation of women and the girl-child, changes brought about by religion and the HIV and AIDS scourge in Kenya.

The Second-generation fiction authors generally highlighted the concerns that were raised by the First-generation writers, but also the failures to conform to the ideals of the Third-generation fiction authors can be said to combine the two previous writers in the sense of not only castigating them but also promoting their philosophy.

Third-generation writers, those who published at the turn of the millennium, present continuity with the themes addressed by second-generation writers, especially regarding life in urban areas. At this age, four decades after independence, some people have lived in town since they were born therefore, issues of culture clash are not that rampant. A new urban culture has emerged and there are emerging issues relating to culture such as changes in language with the birth and evolution of *sheng.*

On the emergence of *Sheng* in literature, Rinkanya (2011) proposes the consideration of the social dimension of literature in Kenya, an aspect that she deems neglected by scholars. She further proposes that the audience be considered in analyzing texts because the targeted audience that she calls the "social addressees" differ depending on whether an author falls under the "serious" literature or the "popular" literature. Writers who fall under the "serious" literature authors include well-known writers such as Francis Imbuga, Meja Mwangi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Oludhe Macgoye while the "popular" writers include Tirop Simatei and Angela Smith. The serious writers targeted the upper

middle class while the popular writers targeted the middle class. Ojaide (2012) observes that there is a change in the style of writing too, with poets, for example, paying less attention to form, but rather focusing on the content. Clit (2009) observes that this Third-generation crop of writers has seen a flourishing of novels that focus on the development of the individual's identity; the *Bildungsroman.* He explains that the characteristics of works in this category voice marginal (gender) identities; breaking taboos; reinterpreting and revisiting long-standing themes and events to allow for the articulation of contemporary commentary, engaging with hybridization and multiculturalism; challenging social and literary conventions; and reflecting national and political engagement.

On addressing nationhood in the African Anglophone novel, Ganapathy (2014) asserts that writers do take part in the structurally complex process that involves the separation of the diasporic intellectual from the nationalist subject formation that defines his purpose as a writer. According to Zeleza (2014), the three dreams tied to the continent's struggles of nationalism in Africa are decolonization, democracy and development. These three goals of African nationalism succeed each other in terms of the nations' growth; first experienced decolonization in the first couple of decades after independence, then dictatorships reigned before the clamour for liberation for democracy and then after the countries became relatively stable politically and economically, the focus shifted to development, though challenges in attaining total democracy persist with many African countries still experiencing post-election violence due to rigging of elections claims.

Kalliney (2019) holds the view that a state's literature cannot be separated from its history because fiction and history have interrelations that are historically determined. Therefore, this study looked at *Of Pawn and Players* (2018) by Kinyanjui Kombani, *Nairobi Heat* (2009) by Mukoma wa Ngugi and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor.

In summary, the discussion establishes that examining a nation's literature entails interrogating its political, social, and cultural realities, since literary texts both reflect and reconstruct the nation's historical and ideological trajectories. The concept of the nation, as Anderson (1991) suggests, is an imagined community whose unity is sustained through shared narratives, and African writers have long engaged with this imagination through their works. From the first generation of writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Achebe, who sought to define postcolonial identity and challenge colonial legacies, to the second generation that confronted neocolonialism, corruption, gender inequality, and social transformation, literature has remained a key site for reimagining nationhood. The third generation continues this tradition, capturing Kenya's evolving urban culture, hybrid linguistic practices like Sheng, and the complexities of belonging in a globalized world. These writers, including Kombani, Mukoma wa Ngugi, and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, use innovative narrative techniques, linguistic experimentation, and cultural representation to renarrate Kenya's national identity. Their works illustrate that the study of Kenyan fiction is inseparable from the study of the nation itself—its languages, ambiguities, and cultural intersections that continually shape and redefine the meaning of Kenyan nationhood.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

African writers address issues that are specific to their time, region or country and so do Kenyan writers. While first-generation writers dealt with the evils of colonialism, the struggle for independence and the liberation of the Kenyan nation, second-generation writers represented newer issues including postcolonial disillusionment, political intolerance and neocolonialism. The study hypothesized that because of the unique period and space within which they are writing, third-generation writers depict a new set of issues and in a different style. The study, therefore, set out to examine the peculiar issues handled by third-generation Kenyan writers and the literary techniques they employed in the process. Besides, the study argued that the three selected authors are writing in an age when the contemporary Kenyan nation is grappling with 21st Century challenges stemming from both local and global spheres, and that these challenges demand new literary techniques in writing.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how the idea of the Kenyan nation is represented in contemporary fiction produced by third-generation Kenyan writers. By engaging critically with three selected novels, the study sought to illuminate how literary imagination interacts with Kenya's social realities, cultural dynamics, and evolving national consciousness.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

This study sought to address the following objectives:

(i) To explore issues in contemporary Kenya as portrayed in the selected texts by third-generation Kenyan writers.

(ii) To examine the nature of the language used in the selected third-generation texts to address the Kenyan nation.

(iii) To discuss the techniques of narration as related to the Kenyan nation in the selected third-generation texts.

1.6 Research questions

(i) What contemporary issues are depicted in the selected three texts by third-generation Kenyan writers?

(ii) How has language been used by third-generation Kenyan writers in the selected texts to address the Kenyan nation?

(iii) Which techniques of narration in the selected texts by third-generation Kenyan writers have been used in renarrating the Kenyan nation?

1.7 Scope and Delimitation of the Study

The study was limited to three selected texts, *Nairobi Heat* (2009) by Mukoma wa Ngugi, *Of Pawn and Players* (2018) by Kombani Kinyanyui and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2002) by Adhiambo Yvonne Owuor. The three texts were selected for this study because their focus is on the Kenyan landscape. The selected third-generation authors not only use language in a unique way but also employ distinct narration techniques.

1.8 Justification of the Study

This study is justified on both scholarly and socio-cultural grounds. From an academic perspective, it advances literary scholarship by addressing a major gap in the study of Kenyan third-generation fiction through the lens of narratology. By applying Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and Gerald Prince's postclassical narratology, the research moves beyond thematic critique to explore how meaning is constructed through language, structure, and narrative technique. This approach not only enriches methodological diversity in African literary studies but also provides new insights into how form and content interact to shape national discourse.

From a socio-cultural standpoint, the study is timely and relevant because it examines how contemporary Kenyan writers engage with pressing national issues, such as corruption, disillusionment, identity fragmentation, and institutional decay, within the broader context of globalization and postcolonial transformation. In illuminating how these authors reimagine Kenya's fractured nationhood, the study contributes to ongoing conversations about literature's role in national self-understanding, civic education, and cultural renewal.

The study further argues that third-generation fiction occupies an important position in Kenya's literary landscape and therefore demands greater critical attention. A review of existing scholarship and online repositories reveals limited studies that examine the works of Kenyan third-generation writers with specific regard to the interplay between contemporary issues, language use, and narrative technique in the selected texts. This research therefore fills that gap by contributing to broader knowledge on how third-generation fiction articulates and critiques the Kenyan nation. Moreover, the study complements ongoing scholarship on the literary representation of postcolonial African nations, particularly Kenya, by examining fiction as a vehicle for representing and interrogating postcolonial politics. The three selected texts, *Nairobi Heat*, *The Dragonfly Sea*, and *Of Pawns and Players*, vividly portray the dilemmas of postcolonial governance

through satirical and analytical modes, thereby underscoring their scholarly significance and the necessity of critical engagement with their narrative strategies.

1.9 Literature Review

The existing scholarship on third-generation African fiction has usefully mapped important thematic and formal shifts since independence. Smit (2009) examined the works of Nigerian third-generation fiction authors with a focus on tracking how *Bildungsroman,* the novel of self-development serves as a vehicle through which new identity is being negotiated. He observes that Third-generation writers negotiate identity differs from that of the previous two generations in that for the third-generation identity is multi-layered and inclusive while for the older generation identity was exclusive and unitary in nature. Among the works, he examined were Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus (2003),* Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) and Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004). His study revealed that the most noticeable arenas in which this new identity is negotiated include "silenced domestic spaces, religo-cultural traditions, constructs of gender and state, as well as in multicultural and hybrid communities" (Spit, 2009, p.v).

The point of convergence between Smit's study and the present one is that, they both examine third-generation writers; however, the divergence lies in the context, the former examining Nigerian authors while the latter examines Kenyan authors. The point of divergence lies in the theoretical framework; while the present study uses narratology, Smit uses several theories including *Bildungroman* theory, theories of allegory, (imaginative) state-formation, feminism, gender and performative, as well as theories of cultural identity and cultural exchanges.

Coffey (2016) in his study titled *Narrow Nationalisms and Third Generation Nigerian Fiction* argues that younger Nigerian writers have not rejected nationalism, but have rather revised it in numerous ways to cater for present-day needs. He explains further that the works of these younger writers have an additional local dimension. He examined Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference*(2012), Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (2009). Coffey's study focuses on nationalism in the works of third-generation authors while this study extended beyond the literary concerns and focused on the language and techniques of narration.

Coker and Ademilokun (2013) examined the language question in Third-generation African fiction. They aimed at establishing if there is a paradigm shift in the language choices of third-generation writers in Africa. In their study, they examined language use in Nigeria, Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This* (2007) and from a Doreen Baigana's *Tropical Fish* (2005). Their study revealed that third-generation writers employ strategies such as code-switching, code-mixing, interlanguage, hybridizations, Americanisms, coinages and loan words. Though the two writers come from two geographical regions on the African continent, their works have common features with the authors of the texts examined under the present study in that they are all third-generation authors from the African continent. The language question in African writing has persisted since the first and second-generation authors, with a dilemma on whether to use the colonizer's tongue or to use local languages. Along the way, came the emergence of hybrid languages such as *sheng* (Kenya), *Camfranglais* (Cameroun) and

Pidgin (Nigeria) that are popular among the youth, the bracket under which the third-generation authors fall. This study intended to examine the adoption of the Kenyan dialect; though not in totality aptly represents the problems of post-colonial Kenya.

Aiyar (2018) a historian of modern Asia examined Kenyan Peter Kimanis *Dance of the Jakaranda* (2017), a novel that falls under third-generation fiction. Aiyar observes that Kimani addresses three historiographical concerns: state building and resistance, narratives and archives, and intimacy and identity. In his review of the same novel, Leiznar (2018) observes that Kimani undoubtedly raises Chinua Achebe's famous judgment of John Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that comes across as racist and debasing; he does not fall into the snare of simply ventriloquizing this view. As an alternative, his Conradian visualization of McDonald's house rapidly gives way to a further generative and hybrid construction. He adds that *Dance of the Jakaranda* addresses the issue of identity after the country's independence. Identity and hybridization are among the themes that characterize third-fiction literary works and are not a focus of this study. The study recognized Kimani's representation of identity and resistance as part of the problems that third-generation writers grapple with but then it branches to examine the post-colonial disillusionment and corruption.

Ganapathy (2014) undertook a study to establish the formal reconstructions of statehood in the Anglophone African novel which focused on novels that included *A Man of the People* (1966), *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968), *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) and *Graceland* (2004). This study is pertinent in this literature review partly for its main concern of statehood in African novels and partly because the three novels examined fall under third-generation fiction and are written by Kenyan fiction authors.

Adeniyi (2021) examined language use in Ugandan Jeniffer Makumbi's novel *Kintu.* Jennifer Makumbi is categorized as a third-generation fiction writer. She started as a short storyteller. Adeniyi observes that Makumbi writes captivating multi-layered historiographies of her country in *Kintu*, a novel published in 2014. She employs Luganda and English and manages to bridge both the linguistic and cultural gaps in the text. The language used by African third-generation fiction writers has been the subject of study by various scholars to reveal how, through literature, these writers address issues amongst them identity, hybridization and sociocultural concerns in the 21st-century African state. The current study, though it assesses the use of local dialect just as Adeniyi does, it shifts its focus to the Kenyan dialects and the use of the local dialects by the Kenyan writers to aptly represent the evils of the post-colonial rule on the Kenyan population.

In her paper titled *Some Trends in Kenyan Women's Novels of the 21st Century*, Rinkanya (2019) observes that literature by Kenyan women addresses issues to do with gender parity and women empowerment. She adds that these women writers portray a changed and transformed image of women from a downtrodden in society to a socially empowered and committed woman who is competing with men in politics and business. A woman, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, writes one of the literary works selected for analysis in the present study. Gender issues are closely related to the Kenyan people's culture. Though the study under review assesses the ills of post-colonial rule, which as Owuor portrays is inclusive of gender issues, this study varied a little and examined other ill of post-colonialism inclusive of corruption, embezzlement, and assassination. Besides, of more importance is the presentation of these ills, language use and the

narrative strategies used.

Krishnan (2013) undertook a comparative reading of Binyavanga Wainaina's literary memoir, *One Day I Will Write about this Place*, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*, and Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins.* His study aimed at examining how national commitment is constructed in third-generation African literature. His study revealed diversity in the presentations of the idea of the nation and this is attributed to the multiply articulated imagined communities in which the individuals' lives and the doubled workings of filiation, affiliation and disavowal at play in contemporary Africa. The current study was domiciled in the Kenyan setting and the Kenyan third-generation in the portrayal of failures of the Kenyan post-colonial government.

Githuku (2014), a historian, undertook a study that examined statehood, national identity and politics in postcolonial Kenya and his study reveals that the growth of the Kenyan state is well documented through the concerns of the various literary scholars throughout the years. On the issue of language in the works of third-generation fiction writers such as Binyavanga Wainaina, Githuku observes that after the repressive years of the Moi regime and the ushering in of democracy, Kenyans expressed themselves more freely. Gituku's work is historical and though it presents the failures of the post-colonial government, it examines it from a historical perspective. This study is, however, not a study of history but rather a study of historical representations through fictional works. More specifically this study analysed the style that the works of fiction selected for this study (re) present history.

The three authors whose works have been selected for this study have other published works. Kinyanjui Kombani's first novel is *The Last Villains of Molo* (2004) which addresses human rights issues during displacement, post-election violence, poverty, rural-urban migration, betrayal and desperation among other themes. Wesonga (2019) examined *The Last Villains of Molo* to establish how the language of separatism is employed in alienating and also galvanizing protest against "the other", and to some extent against atrocious socio-economic realities. Kombani's other novels are *Wangari Maathai: Mother of Trees* (2007), *We Can Be Friends: Theme, Spread of HIV/AIDS* (2007), *Den of Inequities* (2013), *Imani and the Missing Grace* (2017), *Finding Colombia* (2018), and *Eve's Invention: A Novella* (2019).

Besides *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) studied in this study, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's other novels include *Weight of Whispers* (2003), and *Dust* (2014) among other works in French language. Mukoma wa Ngugi's works besides *Nairobi Heat* (2011) include *Unbury Our Dead with Song* (2021), *Black Star Nairobi* (2013), *Mrs Shaw* (2018), and *Conversing with Africa* (2002). In his paper entitled *Narrating Transnational Violence and Crime*, Wanjohi (2015) takes a close look at the theme of violence and crime cutting across Mukoma's novel *Black Star Nairobi* (2013). Generally, Wanjohi analyses in looking at the thematic concerns in Mukoma's works unlike in this study in which the centre of focus and interest is the issues in contemporary Kenya, the nature of language used and techniques of narration in the fiction of the three selected Kenyan third-generation authors. Similarly, Collins (2019) reviews Mukoma's *Unbury Our Dead with Song* by focusing his attention on the thematic concerns in the novel unlike the focus and emphasis in this research.

Although extensive scholarship exists on third-generation African fiction, most studies have focused predominantly on Nigerian authors, leaving a significant gap in the examination of Kenyan third-generation fiction. Previous research (e.g., Smit, 2009; Coffey, 2016; Coker & Ademilokun, 2013) has richly explored themes such as identity formation, nationalism, and language hybridity, yet these studies remain geographically limited and theoretically fragmented. Furthermore, while language use and thematic concerns have been widely discussed, little attention has been paid to how language, narrative techniques, and ideology intersect to renarrate the Kenyan nation. Similarly, there is a notable paucity of studies applying narratology, particularly Barthes' semiotic model and Prince's postclassical narratology, to the analysis of Kenyan fiction. The few studies addressing Kenyan writers (such as Aiyar, 2018; Rinkanya, 2019; Wanjohi, 2015) tend to privilege thematic interpretation over narrative structure and linguistic signification. This study, therefore, fills this gap by employing narratological theory to examine how third-generation Kenyan writers, such as Mukoma wa Ngugi, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and Kinyanjui Kombani, use language and narrative techniques to renarrate the Kenyan nation in the context of postcolonial disillusionment, corruption, and identity reconstruction.

1.10 Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored in the theory of narratology, drawing particularly from the works of Roland Barthes and Gerald Prince. Narratology, as a theory of narrative structure and function, provides tools for examining how stories are told, how language constructs meaning, and how narrative form interacts with ideology. It was therefore an

appropriate theoretical foundation for this study, which sought to explore how third-generation Kenyan writers use language, form, and narrative technique to (re)narrate the Kenyan nation.

Roland Barthes's classical narratology, as articulated in *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives* (1966), views narrative as a universal mode of human expression that cuts across diverse forms such as myth, fable, epic, and the novel. Barthes argues that all narratives share common structural features that can be systematically analyzed to uncover how meaning is produced. His approach is rooted in structural linguistics and semiotics, particularly Ferdinand de Saussure's concepts of *langue* and *parole* and the relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified*. The signifier refers to the form that a sign takes, while the signified represents the concept or meaning conveyed by that form. For Barthes, meaning in narrative arises through the interaction of these two dimensions, and it is always mediated through cultural and ideological codes.

A central tenet of Barthes's narratology is the distinction between denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal, surface meaning of a text, while connotation points to the deeper, often ideological or cultural implications embedded in language. Barthes also emphasizes that narratives are polysemic, that is, they carry multiple meanings that shift depending on the reader's perspective and historical context. Language, in this view, is not a neutral medium but a system of power and representation that both reflects and constructs social reality.

These principles were operationalized in the present study to analyze how third-generation Kenyan authors use language as a signifying system to represent the

postcolonial Kenyan nation. The study treated linguistic features, stylistic innovations, and figurative expressions in *Nairobi Heat*, *The Dragonfly Sea*, and *Of Pawns and Players* as signifiers that point to broader ideological concerns such as corruption, disillusionment, identity crisis, and systemic inequality. Barthes's distinction between denotation and connotation guided the interpretation of literal descriptions, such as depictions of urban decay or political violence, and their underlying meanings relating to disillusionment with postcolonial leadership or moral decay. Furthermore, the idea of polysemy enabled the analysis of ambiguity, irony, and hybridity in the texts as deliberate narrative strategies through which the writers challenge singular and official constructions of nationhood. In this way, Barthes's framework helped illuminate how language in these works operates beyond the surface level of storytelling to signify complex socio-political realities and ideological tensions within contemporary Kenya.

While Barthes's narratology provided a structural and semiotic foundation for understanding how meaning is encoded in language, Gerald Prince's postclassical narratology extended this analysis to the functional and contextual dimensions of narrative. Prince (1982; 2003) contends that postclassical narratology moves beyond the purely structural concerns of classical narratology to include the social, psychological, and political functions of narrative. His approach integrates insights from sociolinguistics, cognitive science, feminism, and postcolonial studies, emphasizing how narratives operate not only as formal systems but also as communicative and ideological acts situated within specific cultural contexts.

Key principles of postclassical narratology relevant to this study include the shift from form to function, the consideration of reader response and socio-historical context, the

integration of interdisciplinary perspectives, and the recognition of narrative techniques as ideological devices. Narratives are thus analyzed not merely for how they are structured but for what they do, how they shape perception, construct identity, and engage with systems of power. Prince also stresses that narrative techniques such as focalization, fragmentation, and temporal distortion are not merely stylistic choices but meaningful strategies through which authors position readers and mediate their relationship with the text.

In this study, Prince's ideas were operationalized to examine how narrative structures and techniques function as vehicles for ideological critique and social reflection in third-generation Kenyan fiction. The study moved beyond identifying narrative forms to interpreting their political and ethical functions. For instance, Mukoma wa Ngugi's use of detective fiction conventions in *Nairobi Heat* was analyzed as a narrative device that exposes the failures of justice and the transnational nature of corruption. Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's fragmented and lyrical narration in *The Dragonfly Sea* was examined as a reflection of the fractured identities and historical dislocations that characterize Kenya's coastal and postcolonial experience. Similarly, Kinyanjui Kombani's realist mode and fast-paced narration in *Of Pawns and Players* were understood as techniques for capturing the immediacy and volatility of urban life under systemic corruption. In each case, narrative technique was interpreted as both an aesthetic and political gesture through which the author reimagines the Kenyan nation.

Postclassical narratology also informed the study's interdisciplinary orientation by situating literary analysis within broader cultural, political, and sociological discourses. This allowed the research to explore how fiction participates in national conversations

about citizenship, morality, and belonging. By applying Prince's emphasis on narrative ethics, the study examined how characters' moral dilemmas and social struggles mirror Kenya's institutional failures, thereby foregrounding the ethical dimension of storytelling as a mode of national critique.

The integration of Barthes's classical narratology and Prince's postclassical narratology provided a comprehensive analytical lens for this study. Barthes's ideas enabled a close reading of language and signification, while Prince's framework allowed for an interpretation of narrative form as a socially and politically situated act. Together, these theoretical perspectives informed the analysis of the three study objectives: identifying the major issues in contemporary Kenya as represented in the selected texts, examining the linguistic strategies used to articulate national concerns, and analyzing the narrative techniques employed to reimagine the Kenyan nation. The application of narratology in this study thus went beyond textual description to interpret how third-generation Kenyan writers use language and narrative form as tools of resistance, critique, and reconstruction in their ongoing project of re-narrating the nation.

1.11 Research Methodology

1.11.1 Research Design

This study adopted the qualitative research design. Qualitative research design is ideal when aiming at gaining insight into a phenomenon through intensive study of narrative data. The method is important in the precise selection of the relevant data for the study. The study was based on a close textual analysis of the three primary texts; *The Dragonfly Sea* by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, *Of Pawn and Players* by Kinyanjui Kombani and *Nairobi Heat* by Mukoma wa Ngugi. The three novels formed a case for

my argument and a strong basis for this research. Similarly, secondary journals and texts formed additional base to give relevant information on this study. Thereafter, the researcher was able to shed light on the thematic concerns, nature of the language used and the techniques of narration on the three selected texts.

1.11.2 Sample and Sampling Procedures

Purposive sampling was used to select the novels from third-generation Kenyan fiction. The sampling procedure was based on the text's time of publication in line with the definition of 'third-generation writing'. *Of Pawns and Players* by Kinyanjui Kombani was published in 2018, *Nairobi Heat* by Mukoma wa Ngugi was published in 2009 and *The Dragonfly Sea* by Yvonne Adhiambo Owour was published in 2019. The choice of the three texts was informed by their subject matter, which includes; corruption, and identity crises among others. These themes seem to be addressed by most third-generation writers but more adequately in these texts and in line with the objectives of this study. Sampling provided detailed information about the data collected and as a result, necessitate the description of the major impact on the findings of this research.

1.11.3 Data Collection Procedures

The primary data was collected from the three selected novels. Data collection was done through the application of the tenets of the narratology theory. The three novels sampled for analysis in this study were subjected to thorough reading to extract the relevant required data. The target elements for focus were contemporary Kenyan issues, language use and techniques of narration. The aim was to juxtapose the themes addressed in the

text and their representation through language and narrative techniques. Besides, secondary data was collected from critical texts and journals both on the internet and physical libraries. In this respect, journals and texts dealing with language use and narrative structure were read to collect the data. Finally, texts and journals that speak about social political issues in contemporary Kenya served as sources of secondary data.

1.11.4 Data Analysis and Presentation

Data collected was subjected to content analysis to respond to the research questions. Data was presented in the form of a thesis and was structured into five chapters; the present chapter formed the first chapter, the second, third and fourth chapters corresponded to the three objectives of the study respectively, and the fifth chapter presented the conclusion and recommendations of the study.

The content analysis method complemented narratology by providing a systematic framework for organizing and interpreting data derived from the texts. The process involved identifying, coding, and categorizing recurring themes, language patterns, and narrative strategies aligned with the study objectives. Each text, *Of Pawns and Players* (Kinyanjui Kombani, 2018), *Nairobi Heat* (Mukoma wa Ngugi, 2009), and *The Dragonfly Sea* (Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, 2019), was subjected to detailed textual reading to extract content relevant to the portrayal of the Kenyan nation, the stylistic use of language, and narrative techniques. Through qualitative content analysis, the study interpreted patterns of representation, linguistic ambiguity, and narrative form as indicators of how the nation is renarrated in third-generation fiction (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Schreier, 2012).

In summary, narratology provided the interpretive theory, while content analysis supplied the methodological process. Together, they enabled a comprehensive examination of *what* the texts communicate about Kenya and *how* they communicate it, revealing how language and narrative structure operate as instruments for reimagining the Kenyan nation in contemporary fiction.

1.11.5 Ethical Considerations

Although this study focuses on published literary texts rather than human participants, ethical research practice remains essential to ensure academic integrity, intellectual honesty, and cultural sensitivity. According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020), researchers are expected to maintain transparency, proper attribution, and respect for intellectual property. Therefore, all ideas, quotations, and interpretations drawn from primary and secondary sources were properly cited and referenced to acknowledge the intellectual property of the authors studied, that is, Kinyanjui Kombani, Mukoma wa Ngugi, and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor.

Objectivity and fairness were maintained by grounding all interpretations in textual evidence and scholarly reasoning, avoiding distortion of meaning or imposition of personal bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In literary research, this aligns with the principle of interpretive validity, which requires that analysis remains faithful to both textual context and authorial intention (Gibbs, 2007).

Given that the study engages with themes of Kenyan nationhood, culture, and language, cultural and linguistic sensitivity was prioritized. Scholars such as Babbie (2016) emphasize that social and cultural research must avoid reinforcing stereotypes or

marginalizing particular communities. Similarly, Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) note that cultural awareness and respect for diversity enhance the ethical soundness of interpretive research.

Honesty and transparency were maintained throughout the research process. No textual data was fabricated, manipulated, or selectively omitted, consistent with the standards of ethical data handling outlined by Resnik (2015). Furthermore, the study recognized the creative autonomy of the authors, ensuring that fictional narratives were treated as artistic constructs rather than direct autobiographical accounts, in line with ethical literary scholarship principles (Bizzaro, 2019).

In summary, the study upheld the ethical principles of academic honesty, cultural sensitivity, and fairness in interpretation, ensuring respect for the creative and intellectual contributions of the authors whose works form the basis of this research.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES DEPICTED BY THE THIRD-GENERATION AUTHORS IN RENARRATING THE KENYAN NATION

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the contemporary issues addressed by the three selected authors in their novels. Over the years, various authors have described that literary texts have to reflect the society that produced them. According to Guerin et al. (2005), literature mirrors the lived experiences and realities of a people, encompassing aspects such as their economic conditions, family structures, environment, values, cultural identities, social hierarchies, political circumstances, conflicts, and religious beliefs.

Wafula and Wanjala (2017) emphasize that examining themes is a vital component in the evaluation of literary works, as it allows for a deeper understanding of the text's meaning and social relevance. This view aligns with Dobie's (2012) assertion that themes lie at the heart of literary interpretation, conveying both the personal concerns of the author and the broader cultural and societal issues of their context. In light of this, the following section explores the thematic concerns in *Of Pawns and Players* (2018) by Kinyanjui Kombani, *Nairobi Heat* (2009) by Mukoma wa Ngugi, and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor.

2.2 Identity crisis

According to Schwartz, Montgomery and Briones (2006), identity crisis refers to a developmental turning point during which individuals experience substantial inner

conflict regarding values, goals, and beliefs, leading to re-evaluation and potential redefinition of the self.

Ishmael's journey in *Nairobi Heat* is deeply marked by an identity crisis rooted in alienation from his ancestral roots. His admission that he had only vaguely longed for Africa "not in a real way" reveals a conflicted relationship with his heritage. While he acknowledges Africa as "the land of his ancestors," the connection is abstract, shaped more by stereotypes than by any lived experience. This emotional and psychological distance is further emphasized when he confesses that he too had internalized Western portrayals of Africa as "a land of wars, hunger, disease and dirt." Thus, even as his skin "pulls" him toward the continent, his mind resists belonging.

The theme of in-betweenness, of being neither fully American nor fully African, is vividly portrayed during Ishmael's first flight to Nairobi. Surrounded by "whiteness" in the form of passengers, crew, and pilots, he is reminded of his outsider status. His identity as an African American does not grant him immediate belonging among white Americans, nor does it offer him automatic inclusion among Africans. Upon arrival in Kenya, the conflict is intensified in his description that though surrounded by "blackness," he is made to feel foreign. He experiences a mixture of "relief and panic," a moment of camouflage that ultimately fails because of cultural disconnection. His statement, "I felt full of useless excess," powerfully encapsulates this discomfort, that he fits in racially, but not culturally.

This tension is further captured in the irony of being called *mzungu*, a term typically reserved for white foreigners, by a Kenyan taxi driver. Despite his blackness, Ishmael's American demeanour and behaviour mark him as an outsider. The incident symbolizes

the disconnect between external racial identity and internal cultural belonging, underscoring his liminal status: too black for white America, too foreign for Africa.

Mukoma wa Ngugi deepens this exploration of identity through Ishmael's encounter with David Odhiambo and the humorous "Stanley to Livingstone" allusion. Here, two black men mimic the roles of European explorers, cleverly subverting the colonial narrative of discovery. Beneath the parody lies a serious commentary: Ishmael is not merely in Africa to solve a case, but to uncover a deeper truth about himself. His journey becomes one of self-discovery, fraught with contradiction and ambiguity.

This narrative foregrounds the complex dynamics of postcolonial and diasporic identity. Ishmael's experiences reflect the broader struggle of diasporic individuals to reconcile ancestral origins with contemporary realities. Mukoma wa Ngugi critiques not only colonial legacies but also the frame-up of diasporic African identities between Western misrepresentations and the nuanced realities of African life. Ishmael's badge and gun, which are symbols of authority in the United States, lose all significance in Kenya, revealing how cultural capital does not easily translate across borders.

Even as he is treated as American at Kenyan customs and again referred to as *mzungu* by the taxi driver, Ishmael cannot escape the conflict between how he sees himself and how he is perceived. His identity crisis is shaped by both racial and societal factors: his blackness, and the meanings imposed on it by different cultures. Ultimately, Ishmael forms a hybridized identity, defining himself as both a black African-American, marked by race, and as someone ancestrally tied to Africa, despite never having been there.

Upon learning of his departure for Africa, Ishmael considers the journey an opportunity to discover his past. He reflects that whatever he finds may either "save him or condemn him", a binary that encapsulates the core of his identity crisis. His search is not only for the truth behind a crime, but also for personal reconciliation between the fragmented aspects of his identity.

When describing David Odhiambo, his Kenyan counterpart, Ishmael remarks that “this brother was so black he looked blue”. This hyperbolic metaphor draws attention to the idea of racial authenticity, perhaps suggesting that the African figure represents a more “pure” or undisputed form of black identity. Through this description, Mukoma Wa Ngugi appears to contrast the African-American experience, complicated by centuries of displacement and cultural hybridity, with a more rooted, albeit idealized, African identity.

Ishmael’s identity is shaped by a tension between his American nationality and his ancestral connection to Africa. He embodies what Young (2020, p. 43 - 44) describes as the experience of becoming “two selves” one’s personal self and the self as perceived through the white gaze. This fragmentation aligns with W. E. B. Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness,” a central theme in African American thought. Du Bois (1994) defines this as “a peculiar sensation... of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others… two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” The desire, he explains, is to merge these two selves into a unified and empowered identity, to be both Black and American without prejudice or exclusion (cited in Young, 2020).

Such rethinking of identity, however, is not merely introspective. As McLeod (2010, p. 252) asserts, “rethinking identity is not a solipsistic activity but is bound up in group

identity, group formation and group hostilities". This is evident in *Nairobi Heat*, where group dynamics and racial expectations influence characters' perceptions and actions. For instance, the police chief, an African-American himself, refers to Joshua, the Rwandan professor and suspect, simply as "the African". His phrasing underscores a perceived cultural and racial divide between African-Americans and continental Africans. The chief, known for his tough stance on Black (read: African-American) crime, finds himself unsettled by a case involving a Black man who does not fit into the familiar American racial framework. Even after Ishmael confirms Joshua's alibi and absence of incriminating evidence, the chief insists on pursuing the case, demonstrating how racialized assumptions cloud objectivity.

This racial tension becomes the catalyst for Ishmael's journey to Africa. Believing that the victim's body was deliberately left at Joshua's doorstep to frame him, Ishmael travels to Kenya to investigate further. His journey reflects not only a quest for justice but also a deeper confrontation with race, identity, and belonging.

O's question, "...how does it feel to be black in your country...," to Ismael on his identity in Mukoma (2009, p. 85), captures an introspective moment between the two men who engage in philosophical musings on racial and cultural identity. Beneath their banter lies a profound existential questioning, one shaped by histories of displacement, colonial legacies, and the burden of visibility. The identity crisis emerges in the text not merely as a matter of personal confusion but as a symptom of fractured subjectivity in the aftermath of colonialism and in the persistent shadow of racism.

The central axis of this identity crisis is Ishmael's uncertain relationship to his racial identity. When O asks, "How does it feel to be black in your country?", Ishmael responds

with frustration and deflection: “I don’t go to bed black or wake up black. I don’t look at myself in the mirror and say I am black. Black is what white folk see” (Ngugi, 2009, p. 111). His response encapsulates W.E.B. Du Bois’s (1903/1994) notion of “double consciousness”, the internal conflict experienced by marginalized individuals who are constantly made aware of how they are perceived by others. Ishmael does not identify himself racially in private moments; instead, his “blackness” is imposed externally, defined through the white gaze. Thus, his identity is not autonomous, but reactive, constructed in relation to systemic structures of perception and oppression.

O, by contrast, offers a different framework of identity grounded in ethnicity rather than race. When asked to define himself, he answers, “A Luo.” He justifies this by referring to cultural practices: “There are things that I do when I am by myself that only a Luo would do” (Ngugi, 2009, p. 111). O’s identity is anchored in cultural continuity and everyday embodiment, not in opposition to an oppressive racial hierarchy. This difference highlights the disjuncture between diasporic and continental African experiences of identity. While O can perform and recognize his Luo-ness as an organic part of his being, Ishmael’s blackness is always relational, always mediated by the politics of visibility in a white-dominated America.

This identity tension intensifies when Ishmael reflects on his presence in Kenya as a Black American. Asked how it feels to be “a black man from America” in Nairobi, he responds with layered ambivalence: “I like you, but I like your wife better...I detest Mathare and whatever it is that keeps people there. I hate your city...and I sure as hell hate your justice system” (Ngugi, 2009, p. 112). His critique is visceral, disillusioned, and almost violent. The contrast between admiration and repulsion reflects a deeper

instability: Ishmael cannot fully identify with Kenya, but neither does he fit comfortably within American structures. His blackness in Kenya does not grant him solidarity; instead, it throws his American-ness into sharp relief. He is both an insider and an outsider who is racially aligned yet culturally foreign.

Even his clothing becomes symbolic of this identity negotiation. While O "blended in with the middle class seamlessly," Ishmael still "stood out" despite dressing in local fashion (Ngugi, 2009, p. 112). That he no longer feels "excessively American" suggests a slow, internal shift but also implies that identity here is performative, shaped by appearance and perception. Bhabha's (1994) concept of "hybridity" is useful here: Ishmael occupies a liminal space, constantly reconfiguring himself through interaction, location, and power. He is not simply African or American, but something in between a hybrid identity constantly under revision.

Ultimately, these responses foreground the psychic dislocation of the postcolonial and diasporic subject. Mukoma uses the informal conversation between O and Ishmael to pose difficult questions about the stability of identity, the legacy of racial hierarchies, and the search for rootedness in a world that defines people through difference. The dialogue is playful, even humorous, but at its core lies a shared uncertainty: what does it mean to belong, and who gets to decide?

Identity crisis is also evident in the African versus African-American identity clash, and one of the most powerful lines in the novel on this subject, is when Joshua tells Ishmael, "You say me and you niggers, but you do not know what you say. You want African and you to be nigger? You desire brotherhood of pain?"

Here, Mukoma sharply stages the disconnect between African and African-American experiences of race. Ishmael, an African-American detective, tries to forge a bond based on racial solidarity. But Joshua refuses that equivalence. To him, being "African" is about surviving genocide, exile, and betrayal, not just systemic racism or police violence. His rhetorical question, "You desire brotherhood of pain?" implies that Ishmael's understanding of Black identity is inadequate, even romanticized.

This tension reflects what scholars call "diasporic dissonance" which refers to the difficulty of reconciling the varied experiences of Blackness across continents (Gilroy, 1993). Joshua is neither fully African (his moral authority is shattered), nor is he accepted in the American racial framework.

Joshua oscillates between hyper-masculine control (commanding, drinking, testing Ishmael's will) and total collapse (delusion, injury, paranoia). His identity crisis is also one of dislocated masculinity where he is a university professor, a genocide survivor, and possibly a suspect. Yet none of these identities give him stable authority. His erratic actions characterised by drunkenness, sarcasm, self-harm all suggest a collapse of both national and personal coherence.

Mukoma presents Joshua as a symbol of the postcolonial African subject who has lost his ideological anchors and no longer believes in the state, in justice, or in redemption. His existential question to Ismael; "Why you here?" becomes metaphysical, pointing to the emptiness left by violence, displacement, and cultural alienation. The exchange between Ismael and Joshua powerfully illustrates the identity crisis of a postcolonial African intellectual haunted by history, feeling lost and unstable in the West, and disillusioned with both African and American political realities. Through erratic dialogue, moral

paradox, and symbolic violence, Mukoma exposes the layered fractures of selfhood that trauma and exile can produce. The identity crisis here is not a momentary confusion but a permanent condition of existential exile where one is caught between worlds, languages, and moral systems.

Mukoma wa Ngugi, himself the son of a renowned Kenyan writer and an immigrant professor in the United States, likely channels personal and observed experiences of racial tension into his protagonist. Through Ishmael, Mukoma explores the multifaceted nature of Black identity in a globalized world, how race, culture, and history intersect to shape one's sense of self, and how those layers are constantly negotiated in both American and African contexts.

Another form of identity crisis in Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* is in the depiction of Lord Thompson. Draped in a filthy white sheet and living in a mockery of African simplicity, he performs what Homi Bhabha (1994) identifies as "colonial mimicry" turned grotesque. This is not solidarity but parody: a slave master living like a slave within a mansion, watched over by armed guards. His caricature of Africanness, complete with proverbs and hybrid accent, reflects a colonizer so entrenched in his delusions of benevolent paternalism that he cannot recognize his own condescension. Fanon (1967) would diagnose this as a "colonial neurosis," where the settler, haunted by guilt and unwilling to cede power, constructs a fantasy of absolution through imitation.

This mimicry is suggestive of a deeper identity crisis, one that afflicts both colonizer and colonized in the wake of empire. For Lord Thompson, mimicry becomes a psychological mask that both conceals and reveals his unresolved colonial identity. By adopting the external trappings of the African peasant while continuing to live in obscene luxury, he

attempts to bridge an unbridgeable gap between guilt and power. Bhabha (1994) argues that mimicry “emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.” In Thompson’s case, the performance of African poverty is not an act of solidarity but an unconscious denial of his role as colonial beneficiary. The resulting identity crisis is grotesquely theatrical: she is neither authentically African nor convincingly penitent, but a caricature of both. His behaviour evokes Fanon’s (1967) insight that the colonizer, in trying to humanize his image, often produces instead a grotesque double, a figure distorted by the contradictions of power, guilt, and the failure of empathy.

Thompson’s mimicry thus produces a fractured identity, where the desire to absolve himself of colonial guilt collides with the need to maintain colonial privilege. He performs suffering without experiencing it, humility without relinquishing authority. In so doing, he becomes the embodiment of what Bhabha (1994) terms “the menace of mimicry,” a performance that threatens to destabilize power by exposing its absurdity, but in Thompson’s case only reinforces it through spectacle and surrealism.

Language, here, plays a key role in this performance of mimicry. Ngũgĩ (1986) argues that language is a carrier of culture, and colonial languages often displace indigenous knowledge systems. Lord Thompson’s usage of African proverbs and his pseudo-African accent reflect not appropriation with understanding, but the hollow aestheticization of a culture he has helped exploit. His question to Ishmael, "Where is your white whale?" further reveals a shallow grasp of literary symbolism, scornfully reframing the African-American detective’s identity through a Euro-American canon. This moment underscores

what Fanon (1963) describes as the coloniser's compulsive need to define and fix the colonized subject through his own epistemic lens.

In Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players*, the theme of identity crisis is powerfully articulated through the protagonist, Thomas, also known as Toma, a university graduate who, unable to secure formal employment, resorts to selling *mutura* in the impoverished neighbourhood of Kiamatawa. This socioeconomic displacement signals not just an economic crisis but also a deep crisis of self, as Toma oscillates between survival and self-worth. His recognition by the betting company, MoneyBet, as a "winner" used for money laundering, exemplifies how exploitative systems can appropriate marginalized bodies to serve elite interests (Mbembe, 2001).

The violent encounter described where Toma is struck in the eye and dragged into a luxury car reveals more than physical aggression; it symbolizes a rupture in identity. The abrupt violence underscores the powerlessness of the individual in a neoliberal state, where recognition comes not from merit but from manipulation (Foucault, 1977). His internal monolog trying to rationalize the attack shows his confusion and alienation in a system that disregards his dignity despite his efforts to be a "law-abiding citizen."

This crisis deepens as Toma reflects on his public identity. He introduces himself as "They call me Thomas Karamu," an important discursive shift that reveals his estrangement from his legal or institutional identity. The name "Thomas" is only used by institutions banks, lawyers, police, and the betting company entities that represent authority and often coercion. In contrast, "Toma" is the name used within his community, highlighting a split between official recognition and lived identity. This reflects W. E. B. Du Bois's (1903) theory of double consciousness: the internal conflict experienced by

subordinated or colonized groups in an oppressive society. Toma, like Du Bois's "Negro," feels the burden of two irreconcilable identities; his bureaucratic self and his street-level survivalist persona.

This condition is further rooted in liminality, a term coined by Turner (1969), to describe a transitional state where an individual is "betwixt and between" social positions. Toma exists in a liminal space not fully recognized as a professional, nor entirely secure in his informal role. His memory of being raised in a religious institution with no next of kin amplifies this rootlessness, aligning with Fanon's (1967) argument that colonized subjects often suffer ontological insecurity, struggling to anchor identity within fractured postcolonial structures.

Moreover, the reference to *esiorori*, a term with no English equivalent, symbolizes the untranslatable complexity of local experience, which modern systems of power often flatten or ignore. It mirrors Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity where colonized individuals live in a "third space" of negotiation between imposed identities and indigenous selfhoods.

Toma's realization that his belongings (grill, charcoal, sausages) are destroyed while he is manhandled reflects not only economic loss but symbolic erasure. These objects represent his hustle, dignity, and daily purpose, now literally in the mud. That bystanders either flee or hesitate to intervene also speaks to the normalized violence and alienation in urban poverty, a reality critiqued in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) reflections on postcolonial urban decay and dehumanization.

The fact that even the police, lawyers, and state refer to him in the formal name "Thomas," yet he questions this designation for they keep asking if he is Thomas Karamu and he keep saying he thinks they are mistaken. This dramatizes a detachment from official identity. He neither fully accepts nor denies it. Instead, he performs a slippery subjectivity as a defense mechanism.

This identity crisis analysis ties into McLeod's (2010) reminder that "rethinking identity is not a solipsistic activity but is bound up in group identity, group formation and group hostilities" (p. 252). Toma is not just an individual in crisis but a representative of a broader class of disillusioned, unemployed youth navigating oppressive structures with little hope of upward mobility.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor employs a lyrical and deeply symbolic narrative voice to explore identity crisis as a central theme of the Indian Ocean world. Through characters like Muhidin and Ayaana, the novel dramatizes the layered negotiations of belonging, race, and citizenship in a postcolonial Kenyan state that remains haunted by histories of slavery, imperialism, and exclusion. Owuor's narrative thus aligns with third-generation Kenyan fiction's broader preoccupation with interrogating the state and unsettling fixed notions of identity.

Muhidin, one of the novel's key figures, embodies this crisis of identity in particularly poignant ways. Orphaned at a young age and raised by a cruel uncle, Muhidin develops a profound ambivalence toward both religion and his racial identity. His vow, *"Between religion and my black skin there shall be a sky's distance until the day I hear the call for Atonement,"* (Owuor, 2019) signals a rejection of imposed identities, whether religious or racial. The poetic variation of voice here renders Muhidin's alienation intimate and

existential. His internal struggle resonates with broader critiques of how postcolonial subjectivities are shaped by inherited hierarchies.

This tension surfaces again when Muhidin returns to Zanzibar after years of maritime exile. Owuor describes his return as a movement back into the "labyrinths of in-between worldliness" (Owuor, 2019), a phrase that encapsulates the liminality of his experience. The metaphor of the labyrinth suggests a fractured, disorienting journey toward self-understanding; an apt reflection of diasporic and coastal identities caught between local histories and global cultural flows.

Muhidin's encounter with a trader in the *Souk* further underscores the racialized dimensions of his crisis. When the trader calls him "Abd", a term meaning "slave" or "servant" (Rahman, 2001), Muhidin asks whether the blackness of his hands condemns him. This moment triggers memories of being similarly addressed by his uncle, reminding him of the haunting racial hierarchies embedded in language and social interaction. The presence of the master-slave binary here foregrounds the continuing relevance of slavery's legacy in shaping contemporary African and diasporic identities, a theme central to Indian Ocean narratives (Prestholdt, 2008).

Owuor also critiques the Kenyan state's failure to recognize the identity and belonging of its coastal citizens. The inhabitants of Pate Island, whose lives have long been intertwined with diverse cultures and continents, remain marginalized and invisible within the national imaginary. The narrative highlights that for decades, Pate residents were issued only death certificates, not passports, a powerful symbol of their statelessness, until Ayaana is finally granted a passport to travel to China. The author pointedly notes that Kenyan foreign affairs officials, unnamed in the text, are puzzled to learn that Pate is

legally part of Kenya. This deliberate omission of official names and the officials' ignorance dramatizes the state's bureaucratic violence and epistemic erasure of peripheral identities.

The novel's engagement with Indian Ocean cultural paradigms further complicates questions of belonging. Coastal communities, shaped by Middle Eastern, Indian, Islamic, and Persian influences, periodically express secessionist sentiments, rooted in a shared ancestry, language (Swahili), and religious tradition. Owuor's narrative voice critically interrogates both the nationalist discourse that marginalizes coastal identities and the external scholarly paradigms that exoticize or erase African contributions to Indian Ocean history.

Indeed, Owuor critiques the glaring invisibility of Africans in Indian Ocean scholarship. She highlights how Africa is often referenced primarily as a source of enslaved peoples, rather than as an integral part of Indian Ocean cultures. Scholars such as Haji Gora Haji are marginalized, and Swahili geographical knowledge is dismissed. Owuor challenges the view articulated by Tolmacheva (2001), who claimed that pre-19th-century Swahili society lacked geographical works or maps, assertions contradicted by Swahili chronicles, genealogies, linguistic evidence, and archaeological findings. The novel thus performs an important counter-historiographical function, reclaiming African agency and knowledge within Indian Ocean discourse.

Through its lyrical narrative voice and its nuanced portrayal of identity crisis, *The Dragonfly Sea* exemplifies the concerns of third-generation Kenyan fiction. Like Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* and Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players*, Owuor's novel foregrounds liminal subjectivities navigating the exclusions of the

postcolonial state and global cultural hierarchies. Muhidin's story, Ayaana's passport, and the silenced histories of Pate collectively dramatize the fractured nature of Kenyan citizenship and the contested terrain of belonging in the Indian Ocean world.

2.3 Crime and Corruption

Corruption, defined as dishonest or unlawful behaviour by those in power for personal gain, is a persistent theme in postcolonial African literature. In *Of Pawns and Players* (2015), Kinyanjui Kombani uses the fast-paced structure of a crime thriller to dissect the systemic corruption embedded within Kenyan institutions. From city council askaris (*kanjo*) extorting informal traders to police officers colluding with criminals and government officials involved in drug trafficking, Kombani offers a scathing critique of a morally bankrupt state. This essay explores how *Of Pawns and Players* portrays corruption and contextualizes the novel within the broader discourse of third-generation African literature. Drawing from scholars such as Madhu Krishnan, Grace Musila, and James Ogude, it argues that Kombani exemplifies a literary trend in which young African writers interrogate the failures of the postcolonial state through the lens of everyday urban experience.

Kombani's depiction of the urban slum Kiamatawa lays bare the petty yet pernicious forms of corruption faced by everyday citizens. The Nairobi County law enforcement officers, commonly known as *kanjo*, regularly harass and extort traders, claiming to enforce city bylaws. Yet, as Toma and other characters reveal, this enforcement is selective and monetized. In reality, *kanjo* operate as "state-sanctioned extortionists," abusing their delegated authority for personal enrichment (Kombani, 2015, p. 33).

This low-level corruption mirrors a more sinister rot at the upper echelons of power. Toma's kidnappers warn him not to report the incident to the police, stating that he would be arrested rather than helped. This reversal of justice demonstrates that the police, like the *kanjo*, are tools of the powerful, not protectors of the vulnerable (Kombani, 2015, p. 61). As the narrative unfolds, readers learn that a Cabinet Secretary, one of the highest offices in the government, is deeply implicated in a multi-billion-shilling drug operation. Moreover, lawyers and law enforcement officers facilitate these crimes by covering up evidence or harassing whistleblowers.

Toma's own journey illustrates the moral compromises induced by poverty and desperation. When he is lured into cooperating with a rigged betting company, he reflects: "I know only too well how money can corrupt people" (Kombani, 2015, p. 51). His admission underscores a central theme of the novel: corruption is not only systemic, but also psychological. The seductive power of money reshapes individual ethics, especially in an economy that marginalizes the poor.

Kombani's novel belongs to a broader literary movement often identified as "third-generation African writing." According to Krishnan (2018), this group of writers focuses on "the politics of the everyday," privileging urban realism and the lives of ordinary citizens navigating failed institutions. *Of Pawns and Players* exemplifies this approach. Instead of offering abstract political critique, the novel uses the genre of crime fiction to explore how state corruption is experienced in informal settlements, betting shops, and on social media.

Musila (2019) argues that popular literary forms such as thrillers and urban dramas serve as powerful tools for social critique. By engaging mass audiences, such texts "[disarm]

state narratives and insert counter-narratives of everyday resistance and survival" (Musila, 2019, p. 77). Kombani achieves this by portraying a protagonist who is neither hero nor villain, but a young Kenyan caught between aspiration and oppression.

Ogude (2012), in his reflections on African urbanism, asserts that African literature increasingly examines "the moral economy of citizenship." Who gets to be protected by the state? Who is criminalized? In Kombani's world, the poor are always suspect, always vulnerable. Whether it is Toma being kidnapped or Aria remarking that the police "will find themselves guarding wheat flour" (Kombani, 2015, p. 105), the reader sees how institutional authority is manipulated to serve elite interests.

Through *Of Pawns and Players*, Kombani contributes to a growing body of literature that critiques the failures of postcolonial governance in Kenya and Africa more broadly. His depiction of corruption is neither sensationalist nor detached; rather, it is embedded in the gritty details of urban life. The novel aligns with the concerns of third-generation African writers who foreground the everyday, offering narratives that expose the complicity of state institutions and the psychological burden borne by citizens. By dramatizing how the powerful exploit legal and economic systems to serve themselves, Kombani raises fundamental questions about justice, accountability, and the role of fiction in imagining a more ethical public sphere.

Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* uses graphic depictions of violence to explore the erosion of state authority and the normalization of criminality in Kenya's urban margins. In the narration of O's and Ismaels visit to Mathare slums, Mukoma presents crime is not just a personal or social pathology but a symptom of systemic state failure, especially in informal settlements where the rule of law is frail or absent.

The narration of the visit to Mathare quickly shifts to the normalized presence of violence, introduced through the public indifference to a woman's screams. The line, *"everybody was going on about his or her business as if deaf to the sound"*, reflects a deep societal desensitization to violence (Mukoma wa Ngugi, 2009, p. 84). In the slum context, where state protection is scarce or non-existent, crime becomes ambient, woven into the everyday experience of residents. This mirrors Mbembe's (2001) argument that in postcolonial states, the absence of state accountability leads to the normalization of death and violation as facts of daily life.

Ishmael and O function as extra-legal enforcers, wielding guns and violence in a territory where the police are notably absent. The lack of institutional procedure characterised by no rights read, no legal identification, no due process, highlights how state justice has been replaced by vigilante-style, improvisational justice. O's act of stuffing a sock into the rapist's mouth and parading him at gunpoint represents a symbolic transfer of disciplinary authority from the state to individual actors (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006). This collapse of legal order suggests a state whose monopoly on violence has been fractured by inefficiency, corruption, or distance.

The narration also depicts militarisation and urban gang power in Kenyan slums. The arrival of *"four young men dressed like they had just popped out of a rap video… holding AK-47s"* underlines the militarization of criminal networks (Mukoma wa Ngugi, 2009, p. 86). These young men represent non-state actors with coercive power, mimicking both global pop culture and local warlordism. Their weaponry and readiness to kill for a rapist comrade suggest the complete inversion of moral and legal order, in which armed gangs take precedence over justice.

This dynamic reflects what Rodgers and Muggah (2009) term “non-state order-makers” groups that fill the vacuum of security and control in the wake of state absence, often operating with de facto sovereignty in urban slums.

Ironically, the Kenyan state appears most vividly in its absence. The state does not intervene, the police are nowhere to be found, and the slum is described as a space where moral logic operates according to local rules, not national law. Mukoma’s depiction aligns with Wainaina’s (2006) critique of Kenya as a bifurcated (divided) society, where urban slums exist in zones of exception governed by informal power, not national policy or constitutional rights. In The Dragonfly Sea (2019), Yvonne Owuor treats crime and violence not merely as incidental plot developments but as symptomatic of wider historical, political, and structural disruptions. This aligns the novel with the thematic preoccupations of third-generation African writers, who, as Moradewun Adejunmobi (2007) observes, move beyond nationalist narratives to explore the uneven effects of globalization, militarization, and transnational ideologies on African subjectivities. Unlike earlier postcolonial literature that situated violence primarily in the context of colonial oppression or the disillusionment of independence, Owuor’s novel confronts new geopolitical configurations that perpetuate violence under different guises.

One of the most vivid instances of such structural violence in the novel is the abduction of Ziriyab by U.S. military agents. The act, carried out without trial or explanation, mirrors the global “war on terror” tactics of surveillance, racial profiling, and extrajudicial detentions. Owuor writes, "Ziriyab vanished one morning... men in black who did not speak hauled him into an aircraft marked only by its silence" (Owuor, 2019, p. 220). This episode captures how global imperial power projects violence into African

spaces under the guise of counterterrorism, a phenomenon Mbembe (2003) theorizes as necropolitics, where sovereign power is defined through the right to kill or let live. Ziriyab becomes a casualty of the global security apparatus, illustrating how African lives remain expendable within contemporary imperial regimes.

Further, the presence of religious extremism on Pate Island, which is, embodied by the character of Fazul and his attempts to radicalize local youth, demonstrates the infiltration of external ideologies into historically syncretic Islamic cultures. Fazul's manipulation of religious identity echoes current concerns about the vulnerability of coastal Kenyan communities to both Islamic fundamentalism and securitized responses from the state. Owuor does not present this violence in isolation but situates it within economic disenfranchisement and geopolitical neglect: "Young men, some no older than fourteen, whispered of glory and martyrdom... their eyes flickering with a hunger no fish could fill" (Owuor, 2019, p. 243). This hunger reflects both material deprivation and a deeper existential crisis, the loss of place in a rapidly transforming, often hostile, global order.

Owuor also explores intimate and psychological forms of violence, especially those rooted in familial absence and fractured identities. Ayaana's father's absence, her mother Munira's silence about her past, and Ayaana's own sense of displacement during her journey to China reveal how globalization erodes the coherence of self and kinship. The violence here is subtle but no less destabilizing. When Ayaana reflects, "I did not know what part of me belonged to the sea and what part to this land of dragons", she articulates the disorientation that comes with crossing cultural and psychic boundaries (Owuor, 2019, p. 311). Her experiences resonate with what Bhabha (1994) calls the "unhomely",

where subjects caught between nations, languages, and histories lose their bearings in both worlds.

Moreover, the novel critiques the commodification of cultural identity through Ayaana's selection for a Chinese-sponsored heritage project, ostensibly to rekindle connections between Africa and the ancient maritime Silk Road. What is framed as a celebratory act of cultural diplomacy becomes, instead, a means of co-opting African bodies into a performance of global soft power. Owuor subtly critiques this process when she writes, "She was an emblem now, a symbol... but she did not feel like a person anymore" (Owuor, 2019, p. 290). The symbolic burden Ayaana carries reduces her lived experience to a transactional representation, mirroring what Brouillette (2007) terms the "literary economy" of postcolonial identities where authenticity is marketed and managed for external consumption.

In this sense, The *Dragonfly Sea* articulates a profound anxiety about the future of African sovereignty, subjectivity, and cultural memory. Crime and violence, whether physical, ideological, or epistemic, are not peripheral but constitutive of the post-9/11 world order the novel navigates. Owuor's exploration of terrorism, militarism, religious radicalization, and personal alienation marks a departure from romanticized national allegories to a more globalized poetics of precarity, characteristic of third-generation African writing. Her work aligns with writers like Teju Cole, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Taiye Selasi, who similarly interrogate the friction between mobility and vulnerability, identity and erasure, in the twenty-first century.

2.4 Gender Relations in Third-Generation Kenyan Fiction

The portrayal of women in African fiction has long been a subject of critical interest. In first-generation African fiction, women were often confined to secondary roles, depicted as entertainers, mothers, or passive figures, while male characters were portrayed as heroes and agents of history (Oloruntoba-Oju & Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013). This masculinist vision of the nation-building project was consistent across early postcolonial narratives, with the male subject cast as the modernizing force and the female subject largely peripheral to political life. Over time, however, scholars such as Rinkanya (2019) and Kruger (1998) have documented shifts in gender representation, particularly within Kenyan women's writing. These shifts reflect broader social transformations, including feminist interventions and postcolonial critiques of patriarchal structures.

In third-generation Kenyan fiction, gender relations remain a contested terrain. While the postcolonial Kenyan state has seen significant changes, particularly on urbanization, globalization, increased female education and employment, literary portrayals of gender still grapple with persistent patriarchal discourses. A novel such as Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) is particularly revealing. As a third-generation work authored by a woman, it offers a complex portrait of female subjectivity within a postcolonial, patriarchal society. When compared with third-generation fiction by male authors, such texts also invite reflection on whether literary gender representation has significantly evolved.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, men and women occupy clearly gendered spaces. Public life, marked by *mabaraza* (public assemblies), politics, and communal decision-making, is dominated by men, who are depicted sitting outdoors and engaging in political discourse.

Women, by contrast, are associated with private, domestic spaces such as gardens, kitchens, laundry areas, and child-rearing, for instance Bi Munira. With regard to subjects of conversation, men's talk is portrayed as serious and political while women's talk is trivialized as gossip. Muhidin, one of the male characters, offers an internal critique of this situation when he observes the objectifying discourse about Munira at the *mabaraza*. The men sexualize Munira's beauty, blaming her supposed seductive powers for male weakness with her gap-toothed smile said to "ensnare men."

Owuor handles these gender dynamics with narrative subtlety. Rather than positioning the narrator's voice as endorsing such views, she uses male focalization to expose the gendered gaze itself. As Blondell (2013) reminds us in her study of Greek conceptions of beauty, the conflation of beauty with morality has long served to control female sexuality and autonomy. In patriarchal societies, a beautiful woman is often assumed to be either virtuous or dangerously seductive, a framing which has allowed male characters in literary texts to blame women for male desire hence absolving them of responsibility while punishing women for beauty or for exercising choice. Examples of such male characters in literary texts include Shakespeare's Othello in *Othello*, Tolstoy's Vronsky in *Anna Karenina* and Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart.* In *The Dragonfly Sea*, Muhidin frustrated by how other men discuss Munira's beauty during the *mabaraza,* revealing both a critical awareness and an internalization of the trope that female beauty causes male downfall. His irritation with how Munira is sexualized implies complicity in a system that blames women for men's lack of self-control. The men's discourse reflects a deep anxiety about women's agency, particularly when embodied by an independent figure like Munira.

This anxiety resonates with wider patterns in postcolonial patriarchal societies. As McNally (2019) observes, modernity and gender equality have often provoked male backlash, reviving the trope of the femme fatale. In *The Dragonfly Sea*, the men's projection of dangerous power onto Munira is part of this lineage, an effort to contain and stigmatize female sexuality under the guise of communal morality. This logic aligns closely with what Freud theorized as the *Madonna–Whore complex*, which according to Bareket, Kahalon, Shnabel and Glick (2018), denotes the polarised perceptions of women as wither pure and virtuous (Madonnas) or vilified as sexually available (promiscuous) and morally corrupt (Seductive Whores). Munira, admired for her beauty but simultaneously blamed for bewitching men, is caught in this binary. The men's discussions during the *mabaraza* do not merely express admiration but frame her as a threat to male control, thereby stripping her of complexity and agency. Such depictions reflect a deeper cultural unease with women who defy the passive, domesticated roles traditionally prescribed to them.

Yet, Owuor also gestures toward the possibilities of female emancipation and postcolonial feminism. Munira's independence, self-sufficiency, and refusal to submit to male control mark her as a counter-narrative to patriarchal expectations. As Mishra (n.d.) argues, postcolonial feminist writers foreground women's resistance to male oppression, using education, struggle, and cultural negotiation as tools of empowerment. Postcolonial feminism in this context critiques both colonial legacies and patriarchal nationalism, which seek to re-colonize women's bodies and subjectivities (Mishra, n.d.). In Owuor's text, this dual critique is visible: Munira's marginalization is both gendered and cultural,

situated in a traditionalist coastal community where patriarchal norms persist even as global modernity encroaches.

Furthermore, Mishra emphasizes that postcolonial feminism seeks to construct gender relations based on mutual respect and harmony, rather than uncritically celebrating female autonomy or vilifying men. In *The Dragonfly Sea*, positive male characters, such as Muhidin, exhibit reflective discomfort with patriarchal norms. His irritation with the objectification of Munira signals a nascent feminist consciousness, suggesting the potential for cross-gender solidarity in challenging oppressive discourses.

While Owuor's novel complicates the representation of gender relations, it is worth noting that third-generation male-authored fiction does not always match this level of reflexivity. Though many contemporary male writers adopt more varied and humanized portrayals of women, residual masculinist tendencies persist in certain narratives. The differential portrayal of women in works by male versus female third-generation authors remains an important field for further study.

The analysis of gender relations in third-generation Kenyan fiction, it would be worth noting that it reflects both continuity and change. Texts such as *The Dragonfly Sea* expose the ongoing force of patriarchal discourses but also foreground female resistance and the potential for more egalitarian gender relations. Through the tools of postcolonial feminism, third-generation writers, particularly women, challenge traditional representations of women and imagine new possibilities for gendered subjectivity. Yet, the project is far from complete. The ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, private and public spaces, and gendered power ensures that Kenyan fiction will continue to grapple with these issues for years to come.

Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* offers a complex, often ambivalent portrayal of gender relations that reflects the layered intersection of race, class, and postcolonial identity. While the novel is mainly a political thriller, its representation of women and the gendered dynamics that unfold within its narrative space merit close scrutiny. Women in *Nairobi Heat* are frequently marginalized, both structurally and narratively, with their roles oscillating between symbolic presence and narrative silence. This marginalization is evident from the onset in the act of naming. Most male characters are introduced with full names and professional titles, such as, Professor Joshua Hakizimana, Detective David Odhiambo, Chief Jackson Jordan, Lord Thomson and the protagonist, Ismael Fofona. These names confer authority and visibility. Even unnamed men, such as the airport employee, taxi driver, and one-man guitarist, inhabit public spaces that assert their presence and function. In stark contrast, most female characters are either unnamed or defined relationally. Maria, for example, is introduced as "Mrs Odhiambo," with her first mention occurring through a photograph shown by her husband accompanied by the words, "Detective Ishmael, meet my wife" (Mukoma, 2009, p. 54). This framing of women as extensions of male characters reflects what Oloruntoba-Oju and Oloruntoba-Oju (2013) identify as the masculinist vision of nation-building prevalent in early African fiction, where women are peripherally cast and men are centred as agents of history.

Even central female figures such as the murdered blonde girl, around whose death the plot revolves, remain unnamed for most of the narrative, reducing her to a symbolic object around which male action and speculation unfold. Janet, the schoolgirl rescued from an attempted rape, is afforded only a first name, suggesting a minimal identity. Monique, the journalist, is one of the few women given a full name, yet she is referred to

primarily by her nickname, “Mo,” and described in sexualized terms: her voice “sounding sexy,” and her beauty emphasized as a barrier between her and Ismael, who observes, “Mo was beautiful and she knew it… I was a traitor to my race” (Mukoma, 2009, p. 91). Such descriptions undermine her professional standing as a New York Times journalist, re-inscribing the trope of women as objects of male desire, even when positioned within prestigious roles.

Gender performance and symbolic power are foregrounded in a key musical scene in which a male guitarist and a female bartender embody contrasting symbolic roles. The guitarist is elevated, both literally and figuratively, through the narrator’s description, becoming a spiritual vessel who evokes deep emotional transformation: “I had been to a place within myself that I didn’t know existed, a place that was beautiful and terrifying” (Mukoma, 2009, p. 56). By contrast, the female bartender is stripped of interiority and agency. Her movements, described as involuntary “as if she was being jerked around by the music” cast her as a passive body upon which masculine energy is enacted (Mukoma, 2009, p. 56). As theorized by Mulvey (1975) and Butler (1990), the female body here becomes an aesthetic object, not a narrative subject. Her exit, returning to her bar station “as if nothing had happened”, further underscores her instrumental presence within a male-centred performance space. Her dance, though momentarily evocative, functions as a site of masculine exchange, emphasized when Ismael buys a round of drinks “for her and the guitarist,” reinforcing a patriarchal economy of reward and visibility (Mukoma, 2009).

A more nuanced portrayal of gender dynamics emerges in the domestic scene featuring Maria, Detective O’s wife. Unlike the bartender, Maria is introduced in a professional

context, grading papers, and described as a high school teacher with a “huge Afro” and a “perfect smile” (Mukoma, 2009, p. 58). Her presence evokes the legacy of Black radical feminism, aligning her with an intellectual tradition that values autonomy and resistance (Collins, 2000). In this setting, O prepares breakfast and boasts about his cooking, momentarily reversing traditional gender roles. However, this inversion is undercut when he jokes, “my wife cannot cook” (Mukoma, 2009, p. 59), subtly reasserting masculine control over the domestic sphere. Ismael’s ironic remark, “a black male feminist detective chef”, acknowledges the performance of progressive masculinity, while exposing its status as an exception rather than a norm (Mukoma, 2009, p. 59). Connell (2005) warns that such performances can disguise the persistence of gender hierarchies, which remain intact even in egalitarian gestures. Maria’s dignified, quiet presence and her exit without fanfare embody the invisibilized labour of many women in patriarchal systems. Her intellectual labour is acknowledged, yet it does not shift the narrative focus away from the male characters. This reflects Hooks’ (1984) insight that women’s work, even when intellectually or socially significant, often exists in the shadow of male narrative centrality.

A pivotal and harrowing moment in the novel occurs during the attempted rape of Janet, a schoolgirl in Nairobi’s Mathare slums. This episode powerfully captures the gendered nature of violence and vulnerability. Janet’s appearance in a white-and-red school uniform immediately marks her as innocent and vulnerable. Her screams prompt no intervention from the surrounding crowd, underscoring the societal indifference to the suffering of women in impoverished areas. It is only when Ismael and Detective O intervene, with weapons, physical force, and commanding language, that the assault is

halted. Their response aligns with the trope of the male saviour, wherein masculine violence is legitimized as protective, and the woman's silence is both literal and symbolic, she does not speak until Ismael directly questions her. This scene echoes Kimmel's (2008) argument that traditional masculinity finds moral justification in the figure of the protector, even as it reinforces patriarchal dynamics. The encounter also dramatizes spatial control; Ismael and O establish dominance over the chaotic slum environment through threats, negotiation, and brute force. Their actions project state-like authority, temporarily asserting a moral and physical order where the state itself is absent. Yet this reaffirms that women's protection is conditional upon the willingness of men to act as defenders, a dangerous and deeply gendered form of safety (Mama, 1995). The failure to summon official police backup highlights the state's ineffectiveness, particularly in informal settlements. Women, in this configuration, are rendered doubly vulnerable: exposed to sexual violence and reliant on unofficial, masculine interventions for survival.

Throughout *Nairobi Heat*, Mukoma wa Ngugi presents gender not simply as a social category but as a site of symbolic contestation. Women are present in the narrative, but their roles are consistently shaped by the demands of masculine subjectivity. Whether as romantic interest, victim, domestic partner, or aesthetic object, they rarely escape the orbit of male experience. Even when the text gestures toward alternative models through Maria's professional life or the gender role reversals at the breakfast table and these moments are brief, often overshadowed by the central male journey. The novel does not necessarily advocate for patriarchal dominance, but it frequently reproduces it with minimal critique. This mirrors Kruger's (1998) assertion that male-authored political

fiction in postcolonial Africa often reproduces the very hierarchies it seeks to challenge. As Rinkanya (2019) observes in her analysis of gender in Kenyan literature, genuine transformation requires not just the inclusion of women in the narrative but a reconfiguration of the narrative structure itself. Until such shifts occur, women in texts like *Nairobi Heat* will continue to exist at the margins, seen but not heard, named but not known, present but narratively constrained.

In Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players,* The opening scene, Thomas being struck by a man from a Mercedes Benz, introduces violence, spectacle, and class disparity as dominant motifs. The act of physical assault dramatizes how the state's coercive power infiltrates everyday life, and the male protagonist's subjection mirrors the disempowerment of citizens before an impersonal system of authority. Through Toma's limited first-person narration, Kombani constructs a focalization that exposes vulnerability as a new condition of masculinity in a capitalist Kenya (Genette, 1980).

Genette's (1980) concept of order, that is the relationship between story time and narrative time, helps explain how Kombani disorients the reader to foreground instability. The novel begins *in medias res*: Toma is hit, humiliated, and dragged into a car before we learn his name or social background. Only in Chapter Two does he retrospectively introduce himself: "I probably should have started by telling you about myself." This delayed self-presentation reverses conventional narrative chronology, symbolizing how marginalized Kenyans are denied coherent subjectivity until after violence has already defined them.

Mieke Bal (1997) argues that focalization "produces the ideological perspective through which a narrative world is perceived" (p. 146). Toma's self-deprecating tone, his

oscillation between irony and fear, and his detailed sensory impressions of mud, pain, and torn clothing anchor the story in the embodied experience of a dispossessed male subject. His fractured temporality, recalling events while uncertain of his survival, mirrors the precarious temporalities of informal laborers who live from one encounter to the next in Nairobi's uneven economy.

Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the chronotope, the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships - offers a lens through which Kombani's Nairobi can be read as a dialogic arena of competing social voices. The setting oscillates between *Kiamatawa* (ironically called "the city of lights") and the elite estates symbolized by the Mercedes Benz and gated compounds. Each space carries distinct gendered connotations: the street is masculine, precarious, and exposed, while the gated home is feminine, enclosed, and protected.

Aria's movement between these two spaces disrupts normative gender boundaries. When she visits Toma's *mutura* stand, she performs what Bakhtin might term a "carnivalesque inversion" of hierarchy; the elite woman temporarily mingling with the common people. Yet, unlike in Bakhtin's carnival, this inversion is not liberatory. Her father's violent reassertion of control restores the patriarchal and class order. Through this oscillation, Kombani narrates the illusory nature of Kenyan social mobility: the borders between classes and genders are porous in fantasy but violently policed in practice.

The relationship between Aria and Toma operates as an allegory of the relationship between citizen and state. Aria's father, wealthy, connected, and surrounded by bodyguards, personifies a patriarchal state that regulates desire and punishes

transgression. Toma's helplessness before his violence dramatizes the condition of the poor male citizen under neoliberal governance: emasculated, voiceless, and criminalized.

By contrast, Aria's fleeting independence, her ability to traverse class spaces, embodies the feminized illusion of empowerment promoted by neoliberal discourse. Her consumption of *mutura* and fascination with "authentic" street life constitute a commodification of lower-class culture, paralleling how the Kenyan state commodifies the poor through informal economies and populist spectacle (Mwangi, 2009). Kombani thus uses gender as a narrative device to re-narrate the Kenyan state as a space of unequal desire, where intimacy reproduces the structures of economic dependency.

From a narratological standpoint, Kombani's choice of a first-person, intradiegetic narrator situates readers within the consciousness of the oppressed. Genette (1980) distinguishes between *who sees* and *who speaks*; in *Of Pawns and Players*, the same character does both, producing what Bal (1997) calls "internal focalization." This narrative structure limits the reader's access to power but simultaneously exposes how ideology operates through perception.

Toma's interpretation of events, his assumption that his attackers might be *kanjo* (county askaris), reveals a psychology conditioned by systemic violence. His reflex to rationalize injustice is itself a form of internalized governance. Thus, Kombani transforms focalization into a political tool, rendering the state's disciplinary mechanisms visible through the protagonist's fearful gaze.

Bakhtin's theory of polyphony (1984) illuminates how Kombani's dialogue between street characters (Toma, Elisha, Aria, and traders) generates a chorus of ideological

positions. Elisha's cynical remarks about women, police, and luck voice the street's pragmatic fatalism, while Toma's introspection offers moral critique. This multiplicity of voices situates *Of Pawns and Players* within a broader Kenyan urban discourse; what Ogone (2018) calls "the dialogic imagination of the city."

Through the collision of these discourses, Kombani constructs Nairobi as a *heteroglossic* space where official narratives of success coexist with the subaltern's speech of survival. Gender relations thus become linguistic performances that mirror the larger political dialogism of the state.

If, as Genette (1980) proposes, narrative form encodes ideology, then the fragmented, episodic structure of *Of Pawns and Players* mirrors the disjointed governance of the Kenyan state. Temporal leaps, abrupt scene changes, and the alternation between interior monologue and public violence dramatize a state without continuity or moral coherence. Kombani's narrative technique enacts what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1993) terms "the aesthetics of disillusionment", the stylistic rendering of national betrayal through narrative fragmentation.

Furthermore, the title *Of Pawns and Players* encapsulates the novel's narratological logic: every character, male or female, is a piece in a larger political game. The body of the poor man (Toma) becomes a narrative pawn manipulated by forces, gendered, economic, and political, that exceed his control. The "players," embodied by Aria's father and his class, script the national narrative while silencing subaltern storytellers. Yet, by granting Toma the narrative voice, Kombani performs an act of counter-narration, reclaiming the power of storytelling from the state.

Through its gendered narration, *Of Pawns and Players* re-imagines the Kenyan state as an unstable, masculinized force that polices bodies and desires. By combining Genette's narratological categories, Bal's ideological focalization, and Bakhtin's dialogism, we see that Kombani's text is not merely realist fiction but a re-narration of the postcolonial nation through form. The novel's temporal dislocation, internal focalization, and multi-voiced dialogue reflect a society fragmented by class, gender, and power. Ultimately, Kombani's portrayal of Aria and Toma transcends romance: it becomes an allegory of citizenship, where love, like governance, is structured by violence, dependency, and unequal exchange.

2.5 Technology and Social Media in Third-Generation Kenyan Fiction

A distinguishing feature of third-generation Kenyan fiction is its sustained engagement with technology and digital culture; a marked departure from the first and second generations of Kenyan writers, where such concerns were largely absent or peripheral. The widespread presence of mobile phones, internet access, and social media platforms is not merely incidental; it is deeply woven into narrative structures, shaping plot, character motivation, and social critique. In narratological terms, technology introduces new chronotopes (Bakhtin, 1981) and new mediations of focalization and voice, while foregrounding the contemporary Kenyan state's entanglement with global technological modernity.

In *Of Pawns and Players*, technology functions both as plot device and symbol of neoliberal exploitation. The gambling economy around which the novel revolves is entirely enabled by mobile technology and internet access. The novel foregrounds this shift when Elisha, a cobbler, sells his old phone and a client's shoe to buy a smartphone

capable of downloading gambling apps. This act illustrates how digital participation now requires material sacrifice, and how smartphone ownership itself has become a marker of economic aspiration and social inclusion in urban Kenya:

“Elisha had to sell his old phone plus a client’s old shoe just to buy a smartphone that could download the betting apps that would make him rich. Or so he hoped” (Kombani, 2015).

This scene encapsulates a new technological chronotope, where time-space compression (Harvey, 1989) allows instant access to global betting platforms, yet traps local users in cycles of debt and precarity. Mobile technology, framed through ironic focalization (Genette, 1980), exposes how the Kenyan state and global capital converge to exploit working-class desires for upward mobility.

Similarly, social media surfaces in *Of Pawns and Players* as both a cultural performance space and a site of class voyeurism. When Aria’s affluent university friends take selfies with Toma’s jiko to post on "the gram" (Instagram), they enact what Mbembe (2001) terms the aesthetics of vulgarity; a fetishization of poverty through curated digital spectacle such as in this excerpt:

“Aria’s college mates from International University took selfies with Toma’s jiko to share on the gram” (Kombani, 2015, p. 31).

Through this scene, Kombani critiques the globalized social media gaze, where privileged youth aestheticize local poverty for online consumption, further fracturing the postcolonial national imaginary. Here, the narrative voice adopts a cynical tone (Genette, 1980), exposing the performative contradictions of Kenya’s digitally connected elites.

Third-generation African fiction, emerging in the wake of post-independence disillusionment, often engages with the complexities of globalization, urban modernity, and digital flows. This generation of writers, many of whom are diasporic or transnational, grapple with how technology reconfigures the African imaginary. As Newell (2019) observes, these authors are "increasingly turning to transnational networks, digital media, and diasporic circuits to narrate African modernities." In this context, Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* (2009) offers a compelling meditation on the intersection between technology, justice, and statehood in a globalized Kenyan setting. Though social media is not prominently featured, the novel's crime narrative is profoundly shaped by global digital infrastructures such as emails, online databases, news portals therefore positioning the Kenyan state as a node in broader networks of information, capital, and surveillance.

Technology in *Nairobi Heat* functions not just as a backdrop but as a narrative infrastructure. The protagonist, Ishmael, conducts much of his detective work online, relying on databases and digital communication rather than traditional forensic methods. He reflects: "Thank God for technology - I could do it online over a cold beer and a slice of pizza" (Mukoma, 2009, p. 12). This offhand remark signals a crucial shift: information gathering is no longer dependent on physical effort but is mediated through the ease and speed of digital tools. It also serves to highlight the contrast between the technologically saturated environment of the United States and the more analogue, bureaucratic systems he later encounters in Kenya. As Ogude (2016) notes, "the bureaucratic ineffectiveness of postcolonial African states is often revealed by their failure to harness or regulate new

technologies." Ishmael's online methods illustrate not only efficiency but also the disjuncture between digital modernity and state institutions in Kenya.

Moreover, *Nairobi Heat* stages a form of global surveillance in which justice is outsourced to transnational actors and digital evidence. Ishmael's investigation relies not on Kenya's national intelligence or legal systems, but on international records, historical archives, and online journalism. In this sense, technology becomes a substitute for state functionality, reflecting Mbembe's (2001) critique of the postcolony as a space where state power is simultaneously excessive and absent. The Kenyan police in the novel are portrayed as ineffective, occasionally complicit, and largely irrelevant to the pursuit of justice. Technology, by contrast, provides access to memory and truth—albeit from outside the nation. This aligns with Nyairo (2010), who argues that contemporary Kenyan narratives increasingly position justice within "networked systems of global accountability" rather than national frameworks.

Technology also plays a role in shaping intimate and affective geographies in the novel. Ishmael's relationship with Muddy (Madeline) is sustained by the imagined possibility of digital connectivity. He muses that their romance could continue through "Skype, emails and jet planes" (Mukoma, 2009). This statement reveals how personal relationships, like justice, are no longer bound by locality but are increasingly maintained through transnational technologies. As Nuttall (2009) points out in her reading of Johannesburg literature, "technologies of mobility and communication have redefined intimacy across urban and global spaces." Mukoma extends this logic to Nairobi and the U.S., capturing how Kenyan subjectivities are forged through both emotional and digital itineraries.

The cumulative effect of these technological interventions is the repositioning of the Kenyan state not as a sovereign centre of power but as a node in a global network of surveillance, crime, and digital media. In *Nairobi Heat*, the state is often peripheral to the action and it lacks the capacity to control or even interpret the flows of information that drive the plot. This reflects a broader theme in third-generation fiction: the reconfiguration of African states as part of "a deterritorialized network of flows and affects," to borrow from Appadurai (1996). In this sense, Mukoma's novel critiques not just the failure of the Kenyan state to deliver justice, but its increasing irrelevance in the face of global digital regimes.

In summing up technology in *Nairobi Heat*, the novel offers a nuanced portrayal of how technology mediates justice, memory, and intimacy in the postcolonial Kenyan context. Far from being a peripheral concern, digital infrastructure shapes the narrative structure, character relationships, and thematic direction of the novel. Mukoma wa Ngugi thus joins a cohort of African writers who explore how digital technologies both expose the gaps in state authority and provide new avenues for justice and connection. In doing so, the novel underscores the paradoxes of the digital age in Kenya: connectivity without sovereignty, and visibility without redress.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, technology operates with more ambivalence. The sea, mythic and timeless, contrasts with the digital technologies that encroach upon Pate's indigenous rhythms. Ayaana's journey is mediated in part through emails, bureaucratic communications, and online exchanges that signal her increasing entanglement with global modernity. Owuor's lyrical narrative voice juxtaposes digital bureaucratic

language with oral tradition and poetic memory, staging a tension between technological modernity and cultural continuity.

Across third-generation Kenyan fiction, technology and social media function not merely as narrative background but as key mediators of plot, identity, and state critique. They shape narrative chronotopes, mediate focalization and voice, and expose the contradictions of Kenya's neoliberal present. In Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players*, smartphones and social media reveal how global technology exacerbates local exploitation and class divisions, while in Mukoma's *Nairobi Heat*, digital networks frame the Kenyan state within global circuits of crime and surveillance. As for Owour's *The Dragonfly Sea*, technology threatens to overwrite indigenous temporalities, while facilitating transoceanic encounters.

In all cases, third-generation writers use technological discourse to narrate the Kenyan state as simultaneously hyper-connected and internally fractured, caught between global modernity and postcolonial disillusionment. Through the language and chronotopes of the digital, they articulate new, often troubling imaginaries of the nation in the twenty-first century.

It is worth mentioning that third-generation Kenyan fiction also foreground how new modes of communication, enabled by digital technology, reshape how characters speak, interact, and imagine the state. The presence of smartphones, internet access, and social media platforms introduces fresh registers and vocabularies, often marked by code-switching, global slang, and digital neologisms, that cross-cut traditional class and ethnic boundaries. These new forms of technologically mediated language reflect not only changing modes of communication but also deeper transformations in social relations,

aspirations, and modes of state engagement in contemporary Kenya. It is to the role of technology and social media in these narratives are discussed in the next chapter on language use in re-narrating the Kenyan nation.

2.6 Conclusion

Chapter Two has demonstrated that third-generation Kenyan authors, Mukoma wa Ngugi, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and Kinyanjui Kombani, engage deeply with a constellation of contemporary issues in their representations of the Kenyan nation, offering textured, critical narratives that reflect the contradictions and crises of modern nationhood. The theme of identity crisis, evident across all the three texts, underscores the fragmentation and fluidity of selfhood in a postcolonial, globalized context. In *Nairobi Heat*, Ismael's transnational black identity becomes a site of tension and introspection, while *The Dragonfly Sea* portrays Ayaana's journey as emblematic of the negotiation between cultural heritage and cosmopolitan belonging. In *Of Pawns and Players*, youth grapple with identity within the constraints of urban poverty and structural exclusion, illustrating how class mediates one's sense of self in the postcolonial Kenyan nation.

Crime and corruption emerge as systemic, almost normalized aspects of everyday life, reflecting a disillusionment with institutions that fail to serve or protect. Mukoma's noir-inflected portrayal of a nation complicit in violence, Owuor's depiction of shadowy maritime networks, and Kombani's mapping of urban crime economies all converge on a common critique: the erosion of ethical governance and the complicity of state agents in perpetuating injustice. These authors do not merely present crime as deviance, but as

symptomatic of broader structural rot, where justice is unevenly distributed and power is weaponized.

Gender relations are treated with varying degrees of nuance, but all three novels confront the persistent marginalization of women in both public and private spheres. In *Nairobi Heat*, women's narrative roles are constrained by patriarchal scripts, yet figures like Maria subtly challenge traditional roles. *The Dragonfly Sea* offers a richer portrayal of female agency through Ayaana's evolution, complicating conventional gender binaries. Kombani's work, while male-centered, gestures toward the intersection of gender and economic vulnerability, particularly in its treatment of transactional relationships and the commodification of femininity in urban spaces.

Finally, the incorporation of technology and social media reflects the changing modalities of communication, surveillance, and resistance in contemporary Kenya. Owuor's evocation of maritime digital mapping, Mukoma's depiction of investigative journalism, and Kombani's attention to mobile phones and informal networks all speak to how digital technologies shape access to power, identity formation, and political awareness. These technologies act as both tools of liberation and instruments of control, amplifying voices while also facilitating new forms of surveillance and manipulation.

Collectively, these narratives do more than reflect contemporary issues; they interrogate the very foundations of the Kenyan nation, exposing its fractures, illuminating its silences, and imagining the complex social negotiations that define everyday life. Through their nuanced depictions, third-generation Kenyan authors position literature as a vital space for critical engagement with the political, social, and technological realities of a nation in flux.

CHAPTER THREE

LANGUAGE USED IN RENARRATING THE KENYAN NATION

3.1 Introduction

Language serves as a crucial vehicle for the transmission of thought and culture. As Taiwo (1976, p. 14) aptly observes, "a writer's language is a mirror held up to his personality and his particular circumstance." This insight underscores the variability of language across individuals and contexts, making the analysis of language use in literary texts both necessary and revealing.

This chapter explores how three Kenyan third-generation writers use language to depict the Kenyan nation. Given that language is not only a tool for communication but also a carrier of culture, this chapter investigates how the linguistic choices made by these authors reflect notions of Kenyanness and articulate the diverse cultural realities within the Kenyan nation. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986, p. 13) emphasizes the dual role of language, describing it as "both a means of communication and a carrier of culture." He distinguishes between language that reflects real life, language that imitates it, and language that functions as the foundation and process through which culture evolves.

3.2 Different language registers for different social classes

Language in Kenya operates along social and racial lines, with accents and registers often revealing one's class or ethnic background. The linguistic stratification evident in Kenyan society mirrors broader socio-economic and historical divides. As Ngũgĩ (1986) reiterates, language encapsulates lived experience and cultural history; it evolves with and within society.

Odhiambo (2008, p. 1) points out that, like much of Africa, Kenya's postcolonial urban landscape “remains a place defined by an inchoate relationship between the different social classes occupying it.” In other words, urban spaces in Kenya host a complex and often uneasy coexistence between the rich and the poor. This class tension is vividly portrayed in Kinyanjui Kombani’s *Of Pawns and Players*, set in Nairobi’s urban milieu. Here, characters from divergent economic backgrounds, such as Toma, Elisha, and Mama Fua (representing the poor), and Aria, her family, Waziri, and the faceless owners of betting companies (representing the wealthy), cohabit the same space but speak different "languages," both literally and symbolically.

Kombani’s novel demonstrates how language can encode class position. Toma, the protagonist, comes from the lower socio-economic class, and his speech reflects this background. He often draws from his indigenous language, evidenced by expressions such as *esiorori*, as well as urban slang associated with Nairobi’s informal settlements. His vocabulary is grounded in the everyday realities of struggle, hustle, and survival. This use of localized, vernacular expressions situates Toma firmly within the socio-linguistic landscape of Kenya’s urban poor and underscores how language can function as a marker of identity and social belonging.

In contrast, characters from affluent backgrounds employ more polished and formal registers. Their command of English, in particular, is often presented as a symbol of privilege and Western-oriented education. This contrast in language use highlights the socio-economic divide and the cultural hierarchies entrenched in Kenya’s urban centres.

Thus, through the deliberate use of varied language registers, Kombani and other Kenyan writers not only paint a realistic portrait of contemporary Kenyan society but also critique

the structural inequalities embedded in its linguistic practices. Language becomes both a mirror and a site of contestation-a space where class, power, and identity are negotiated.

One of the most striking features of *Of Pawns and Players* is the differential use of language across social classes. Kombani strategically assigns characters distinct language registers that mirror their socio-economic status. This aligns with Odhiambo's (2008, p. 1) observation that Kenya's urban spaces remain defined by "an inchoate relationship between the different social classes occupying it." In this narrative, characters such as Toma, Elisha, and Mama Fua, representing the urban poor, are portrayed using a blend of *Sheng*', vernacular expressions (e.g., *esiorori*), and street slang. Their language reflects both their cultural rootedness and their marginalization.

In contrast, characters such as Aria, Waziri, and the faceless elite behind betting companies employ more formal or neutral English, marking their social distance and institutional power. This differential use of language not only exposes class stratification but also reinforces what Newell (1997) describes as the tension between "standard" language and subversive forms in African literature. Through these linguistic choices, Kombani illustrates how the nation is perceived and experienced differently across social strata.

Language here operates as more than mere communication; it functions as what Adejunmobi (2002) calls a "cultural repertoire" that encodes class, aspiration, and resistance. In the informal speech of the ghetto youth or the bureaucratic jargon of state representatives, we encounter the everyday performativity of class, and by extension, the uneven embodiment of the Kenyan nation.

Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* (2009) is a hybrid detective novel that intertwines African and Western narrative traditions to interrogate questions of identity, justice, and postcolonial power. The novel's linguistic texture, its alternation between African vernacular registers, slang, and standard English, functions not merely as a stylistic choice but as a socio-ideological commentary on class divisions within Kenyan society.

By deploying diverse linguistic registers, Mukoma constructs a polyphonic narrative that reflects the stratification of postcolonial Kenya into globalized elites, urban middle classes, and marginalized underclasses. This discussion uses narratology (Genette, 1980; Bal, 1997) to show how language in *Nairobi Heat* performs social distinction, power negotiation, and ideological critique.

A language register refers to a variety of language used in a specific social setting or for a particular purpose (Halliday, 1978). In literature, different registers can encode social hierarchies, educational backgrounds, and power relations among characters.

In narratological terms, Mukoma's manipulation of linguistic registers corresponds to what Genette (1980) calls *narrative voice* and *mood*: the choice of diction and style through which the narrator mediates story events. It also resonates with Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia, the coexistence of multiple social voices and linguistic styles within a single text.

Mukoma's novel thus becomes a linguistic palimpsest: the language of the police procedural genre intertwines with African oral idioms, urban slang, and bureaucratic jargon to represent the heterogeneity of Kenyan social life.

The upper class in *Nairobi Heat,* represented by politicians, foreign diplomats, and NGO executives, communicates in formal, often inflated English, reflecting both education and social distance. Their speech patterns mimic the bureaucratic register of international institutions, characterized by abstraction, politeness, and euphemism.

When African leaders and Western aid workers discuss the murder case at the center of the novel, their language is filled with technocratic terms such as *"development project," "strategic partnership,"* and *"post-conflict rehabilitation."* This bureaucratic discourse, as Fairclough (1995) notes, reflects institutional power and ideological control: it conceals inequality behind neutral, technocratic language.

Mukoma uses this register satirically to expose class hypocrisy. The elite's reliance on formal English distances them from the vernacular life of Nairobi's streets, marking them as culturally alienated. Their polished English is not a mark of intellect but of linguistic mimicry, what Bhabha (1994) describes as the postcolonial subject's imitation of colonial authority to gain legitimacy.

The novel's middle-class characters, including the protagonist Detective Ishmael, occupy a linguistically hybrid position. Having studied or lived abroad, they navigate between American English, Kenyan English, and urban slang, embodying the tensions of globalized modernity.

Ishmael's narration blends African American vernacular with the idioms of Nairobi English. His speech is informal, witty, and self-reflexive, alternating between the registers of detective fiction and street realism. This code-switching (Gumperz, 1982)

reflects the dual consciousness of Kenya's educated middle class, caught between local identity and Western cultural capital.

For instance, Ishmael's inner monologue often shifts from colloquial English ("This city had its own way of breathing") to African idioms ("even the dust had stories"). This linguistic fluidity mirrors the hybrid identity of Kenya's urban professionals, who, though fluent in global discourse, remain haunted by national disillusionment.

Mukoma thus uses register variation to articulate what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) calls the "colonial alienation" of the educated elite: their speech reveals both linguistic mastery and cultural estrangement.

The lower-class characters, street children, informal workers, and petty criminals, speak in Sheng, a hybrid urban slang that fuses Swahili, English, and vernacular languages. This linguistic innovation, associated with Nairobi's youth culture, symbolizes resistance and creative survival.

Sheng operates as what Bakhtin (1981) would call a *"subversive register"*: it disrupts official hierarchies by mocking both colonial English and Swahili's nationalist purity. When street characters converse in Sheng, their speech is vivid, rhythmic, and defiant, expressing solidarity within marginalization.

For example, when a street informant tells Ishmael, *"Msee, life ni survival hapa, hakuna justice,"* Mukoma deliberately leaves the line untranslated. The untranslated Sheng signals exclusion for the outsider reader but inclusivity for Nairobi insiders, marking linguistic mastery as a class and cultural boundary.

Here, language becomes a class marker and a site of resistance. While the elite's English signifies institutional power, Sheng embodies the subaltern's creativity and adaptability in a system that denies them voice. As Barber (1997) argues, African popular languages often function as "arenas of negotiation where marginalized groups reclaim agency through linguistic play."

One of Mukoma's key narratological strategies is register shift during cross-class encounters. When Ishmael interrogates lower-class witnesses or speaks to elite officials, his diction adjusts accordingly. These shifts dramatize Kenya's rigid class boundaries and the linguistic performances required to traverse them.

For instance, when addressing an American diplomat, Ishmael adopts formal syntax and professional vocabulary ("We are coordinating with your embassy for intelligence cooperation"). But when conversing with Nairobi locals, he switches to Sheng-inflected English ("Manze, hii case iko tricky sana").

This dynamic illustrates what sociolinguists call style shifting, the conscious alteration of linguistic style based on context and audience (Labov, 1972). In narratological terms, such shifts create tonal variation and expose the performative nature of class identity: language becomes a costume characters wear to navigate power structures.

Mukoma's use of multiple registers does not simply represent class; it critiques the ideological structures that produce inequality. The elite's formal English masks corruption, while the underclass's Sheng expresses authenticity and raw truth.

By juxtaposing these registers, Mukoma enacts what Bakhtin (1981) terms *dialogism*: the collision of social languages within a single text. The narrative's linguistic heteroglossia

mirrors the ideological struggle between Kenya's cosmopolitan aspiration and its moral decay.

The novel's title itself, *Nairobi Heat*, invokes both the literal temperature of the city and the emotional and linguistic heat generated by social friction. The "heat" is linguistic: the clash of registers produces tension, irony, and rhythm, underscoring the city's contradictions.

From a narratological standpoint, the city of Nairobi itself functions as a collective narrator, its "voice" composed of overlapping registers. Mukoma's omniscient narration weaves together the formal reportage of police procedure, the lyrical imagery of African orature, and the gritty realism of street dialogue.

This polyphonic narrative structure (Bakhtin, 1981) transforms language into an index of social multiplicity. The coexistence of elite, middle-class, and subaltern registers constructs Nairobi as a dialogic space, a postcolonial city that speaks in tongues, where power and poverty, privilege and marginality, intersect linguistically.

In *Nairobi Heat*, Mukoma wa Ngugi uses language registers as social semiotics, encoding class difference, power, and ideology in the very texture of speech. Formal English marks the distance of the elite; hybrid English and Sheng reflect middle-class negotiation; and pure Sheng becomes the idiom of resistance.

Through narratological layering, Mukoma turns linguistic variation into narrative meaning. His polyglot Kenya is a nation still haunted by its colonial past but alive with vernacular innovation. By allowing diverse voices to coexist, Mukoma redefines the

Kenyan state as a linguistic mosaic, a space where social class is spoken, contested, and reimagined through language.

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) is a linguistically rich narrative that mirrors Kenya's complex social stratifications and postcolonial anxieties. Through her strategic use of varied language registers, Owuor dramatizes the interactions between social classes, revealing how speech, accent, and diction reflect historical inequalities, class identities, and ideological power relations in postcolonial Kenya. The novel's narrative texture embodies what Bakhtin (1981) describes as *heteroglossia*, the coexistence of multiple speech types and voices within a single text, which allows Owuor to portray Kenya as a dialogic, contested linguistic space. Drawing on narratological theory (Genette, 1980; Bal, 1997) and sociolinguistic perspectives (Halliday, 1978; Fairclough, 1995), this essay explores how Owuor's manipulation of linguistic registers exposes the enduring links between language and class in the Kenyan state, while simultaneously offering a decolonial vision of identity and belonging.

Owuor's representation of the elite and bureaucratic class is marked by a distinct, formalized English register. The political elite, government bureaucrats, and foreign diplomats in *The Dragonfly Sea* speak in technocratic and euphemistic tones, full of developmental and policy jargon phrases such as "partnership," "capacity building," and "security cooperation." These bureaucratic expressions embody what Fairclough (1995) terms the *ideological discourse of authority*, in which language functions as a mechanism of social control and legitimization. Through narratological distance, Owuor presents these voices using what Genette (1980) calls *external focalization*, keeping them emotionally detached and impersonal. The elite's register is characterized by abstraction

and precision but lacks warmth or moral depth, reflecting their alienation from the local realities they claim to govern. When Owuor writes that "they spoke of progress, but their voices erased the sea," she captures this paradox; a language that claims enlightenment but enacts erasure (Owuor, 2019, p. 243). In this way, the bureaucratic register becomes not just a marker of class but also a symbol of epistemic violence, where power is exercised through linguistic distance.

In striking contrast, the coastal community's speech, especially that of Ayaana, Munira, and the island elders, is infused with Swahili idioms, Qur'anic Arabic expressions, and poetic orature. This orality reveals a deep connection between language, spirituality, and collective memory. For instance, the elders' utterance *Bahari ni roho ya visiwa* ("The sea is the soul of the islands") epitomizes a worldview in which nature and language are intertwined, suggesting that the community's speech is a vessel of cultural continuity. According to Halliday (1978), language operates as a *social semiotic,* a symbolic system that constructs reality. Owuor's use of the coastal register, therefore, reflects an epistemological stance rooted in relationality and community rather than individualism or technocracy. Narratively, Owuor blurs the boundary between narrator and character through *metalepsis*, allowing the oral rhythm and metaphorical density of coastal speech to seep into the narration itself (Bal, 1997). This produces what Bakhtin (1981) identifies as *dialogism*, a multiplicity of voices that coexist and contest one another, foregrounding Kenya's multilingual reality. The orature-based register becomes a language of resistance, challenging the hierarchies of the elite's bureaucratic English.

The protagonist Ayaana's evolving speech exemplifies a hybrid register that reflects both social aspiration and cultural displacement. As she moves from the Swahili-speaking

coast to global spaces such as China, Ayaana adopts cosmopolitan English, which signifies education, mobility, and modernity. However, this linguistic ascent also alienates her from her roots. Her hybrid code-switching between Swahili and English dramatizes what Bhabha (1994) calls the *Third Space,* a liminal zone where hybrid identities subvert colonial binaries but also experience dislocation. Ayaana's polished English signifies her entry into a higher social class, while her return to Swahili reclaims emotional authenticity and communal belonging. Owuor thus uses Ayaana's language evolution as a metaphor for the postcolonial subject's internal struggle: to participate in global modernity without surrendering indigenous identity. The tension in Ayaana's register mirrors the Kenyan state's own predicament as a nation linguistically and ideologically suspended between colonial inheritance and decolonial self-assertion.

Beyond Kenya's shores, Owuor expands her linguistic landscape through a maritime register, spoken by sailors, pilgrims, and traders across the Indian Ocean. This polyglot speech blends Swahili, Arabic, and Malay elements, evoking an older cosmopolitanism that predates colonial borders. Unlike the rigid hierarchies of bureaucratic English, this maritime register is egalitarian and dialogic, embodying a decolonial imagination of interconnectedness. Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia is vividly realized here: the sea becomes a metaphorical and linguistic space where diverse voices meet, exchange, and transform one another. This linguistic plurality undermines the authority of the nation-state's singular narrative, offering instead a vision of belonging grounded in fluidity and shared humanity.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, then, language operates as both a class marker and a narrative device. Owuor's differentiated registers reflect Kenya's postcolonial stratification, the

bureaucratic elite speak in the abstract idiom of policy, the coastal poor in the lyrical idiom of orature, and the educated middle class in hybridized English. Yet, through the novel's polyphonic narrative form, these registers do not remain isolated; they constantly intersect and conflict, enacting what Genette (1980) calls *narrative transgression*, where boundaries between speech levels and perspectives are blurred. This interplay exposes the ideological work of language in structuring social reality, even as it opens up spaces for empathy and recognition. Owuor's linguistic artistry transforms the novel into a moral and mnemonic archive that records Kenya's struggle to reconcile its diverse identities within a fractured social order.

Ultimately, Owuor's novel demonstrates that language is not merely a communicative medium but a site of historical negotiation and class consciousness. The bureaucratic register encodes alienation and control; the coastal register preserves memory and resistance; the hybrid register dramatizes the psychological cost of modernity; and the maritime register envisions a decolonial cosmopolitanism. Through her narratological layering of voices, Owuor renarrates the Kenyan state as a linguistic mosaic, where each register embodies a different facet of the nation's social imagination. In doing so, *The Dragonfly Sea* reaffirms the idea that literature functions not only as an artistic expression but as a critical discourse on the politics of language, identity, and class in postcolonial Kenya.

3.3 Language, Identity, and the Postcolonial State

Third-generation African writers often employ hybridized language to express the fragmented identity of the postcolonial subject. As Krishnan (2014) argues, this

generation's prose frequently bends "global English" to local sensibilities, producing a form that is both resistant and reflective. Kombani, writing from within Nairobi's socioeconomic fractures, adopts this strategy to foreground how ordinary Kenyans engage with a nation that is both distant and intrusive.

The use of Sheng' in *Of Pawns and Players*, for instance, is not merely stylistic. It performs a political function: it resists the homogeneity of "proper" English while asserting the presence of a marginalized urban youth culture. As Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) notes, African writers often use non-standard forms to "narrate themselves into the nation" on their own terms. This strategy resonates with Ngũgĩ's (1986) assertion that language "forms the basis and process of evolving culture." Here, linguistic hybridity becomes a method of cultural narration and nation critique.

Similarly, the very act of switching between registers such as vernacular, *Sheng*' and bureaucratic English echoes what Edoro (2014) calls the "political desire" of African prose: to document the nation as a site of crisis, contradiction, and negotiation. This multiplicity of voices and registers destabilizes the illusion of a unified national language, laying bare the fractured realities of nationhood in Kenya.

In Mukoma's *Nairobi Heat,* Professor Hakizimana speaks with an accent when describing his whereabouts, 'About twelve thirty. I walk. I like walk ... to wash whiskey out of my blood." Ismael tells him, 'Your accent ... Where are you from?' and the professor responds,'My friend, everyone has accent ... mine just mean I speak two languages, French and Kinyarwanda. I am from Rwanda ... and Kenya. My name is Joshua Hakizimana." (Mukoma, 2009, p.7). The dialogue between Ishmael and Professor Hakizimana demonstrates how multilingualism can signal both inclusion and exclusion.

The professor states, “everyone has accent ... mine just mean I speak two languages, French and Kinyarwanda.” This response is a subtle assertion of postcolonial linguistic pride in contrast to Ishmael’s monolingual identity. It challenges the dominant Western paradigm that often frames accented English as inferior or comical (Canagarajah, 2013). By presenting accented speech with poise and intellect, Mukoma reframes multilingual fluency as a form of power rather than deficiency.

This moment of linguistic juxtaposition also critiques how the Kenyan nation has historically treated language. In colonial and postcolonial Kenya, English has functioned as a gatekeeper for access to education, employment, and political legitimacy (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). By giving the Rwandese professor eloquence through his non-standard English, Mukoma suggests that language policies in Kenya, and by extension, Africa must be decolonized to reflect plural identities.

Professor Hakizimana's description of himself as “from Rwanda ... and Kenya” destabilizes narrow definitions of citizenship and national belonging. His accented English is not just linguistic but rather existential. It captures his dual identity as both insider and outsider, a survivor of genocide and a scholar navigating multiple geographies. This aligns with what Mbembe (2001) describes as the “postcolony”; a space where identity is fragmented, and belonging is continuously negotiated.

The professor's language use also contrasts sharply with Ishmael's. The detective, despite being the authority figure, feels like “the village idiot” in the face of Hakizimana’s eloquence and education. This inversion of power through language is significant: it questions the authority of nation representatives who are culturally disconnected from the African realities they investigate. When Hakizimana introduces himself as a “teacher of

Genocide and also Testimony," he links language to the act of witnessing. Testimony becomes both a narrative and a moral obligation. In this sense, Mukoma's language use parallels broader third-generation concerns with historical justice, memory, and truth-telling (Ogude, 2012). The Kenyan nation, often complicit in violence and silence, becomes the backdrop against which these alternative forms of testimony gain urgency. Thus, the dialogue's fractured, accented, and multilingual structure reflects the fractured postcolonial self and critiques a nation that has failed to reconcile its historical traumas.

Mukoma wa Ngugi's use of language in *Nairobi Heat* exemplifies the ways third-generation Kenyan authors subvert conventional forms of literary expression to interrogate the nation. Through multilingual dialogue, accented English, and subtle shifts in narrative authority, these writers reveal the complexities of belonging, justice, and identity in a postcolonial context. Language becomes both a site of struggle and a medium of resistance.

"Was she one of your students?' I interrupted. I didn't need a history lesson. 'No, never seen her. Not type that take my class.' He sounded dismissive. 'What type is that?' 'Bohemians and Peace Corps types ... What you Americans call trust fund babies, no?' He broke into a short laugh". (Mukoma 2009, P.11)

In the above dialogue between Ismael and Professor Hakizimana, Mukoma uses concise, accented, and ironic dialogue to expose underlying social and ideological tensions between African intellectuals and Western liberal actors, particularly in postcolonial contexts shaped by NGO culture and unequal globalization. Through the professor's speech, "Bohemians and Peace Corps types ... What you Americans call trust fund babies, no?" Mukoma leverages language as critique, targeting the moral ideals often associated

with Western expatriates in Africa. The professor is mocking people who come to Africa full of lofty ideals, but whose engagement is often superficial, naive, or self-serving just like the *Never Again Foundation* headed by Samuel in Nairobi.

The professor's English is grammatically economical, omitting articles and auxiliary verbs ("Not type that take my class"), which marks his speech as non-native. Yet, this non-standard syntax does not denote ignorance; rather, it functions as linguistic resistance and self-possession (Canagarajah, 2013). His command of idiomatic English ("trust fund babies") signals both fluency and cultural fluency, which he uses ironically to mock liberal Western idealism that, in his eyes, lacks seriousness and engagement with African realities.

The phrase "Bohemians and Peace Corps types" is saturated with irony. The professor reduces these figures, often idealized as benevolent actors, to stereotypes of privilege and detachment. His laughter after the phrase reinforces this critique. In doing so, Mukoma aligns with a broader trend among third-generation Kenyan authors who scrutinize how language is complicit in neoliberal and postcolonial power structures (Ogude, 2012).

The detective's interruption when he asks, "Was she one of your students?" and later, "I didn't need a history lesson," serves to contrast his impatience with context against the professor's layered speech. Here, language use signals differing epistemologies: the detective seeks facts, the professor offers context, ideology, and critique. Mukoma stages this linguistic tension to dramatize broader clashes between technocratic policing and humanistic knowledge, between state authority and intellectual dissent.

Ultimately, Mukoma's use of compact, accented, and ironic language destabilizes assumptions about fluency, authority, and the legitimacy of voice. The professor's speech not only reveals his disdain for superficial forms of engagement with Africa but also reclaims the right to define African intellectual space on his own terms.

In *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019), Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor deploys language as a narrative, ideological, and identity-forming tool in the reimagining of the Kenyan state. The novel's linguistic hybridity which has a blending of Swahili, Arabic, English, and local dialects, foregrounds the postcolonial condition of in-betweenness, a tension between national identity and global interconnectedness.

Drawing on narratology, this paper explores how Owuor uses narrative voice, focalization, and discourse style (Genette, 1980; Bal, 1997) to construct the Kenyan state not as a fixed geopolitical entity, but as a discursive and affective space shaped by historical trauma, linguistic negotiation, and cultural memory. Owuor's narrative language reclaims the silenced voices of Kenya's coastal communities, challenging dominant national narratives that privilege the interior, the colonial archive, and the bureaucratic state.

Narratology, as defined by Genette (1980), concerns itself with how narratives are structured, how stories are told rather than what is told. Yvonne Owuor's narrative technique employs what Bal (1997) calls *focalization*: the filtering of events through the consciousness of characters whose linguistic and cultural positions are marginal to the Kenyan nation-state.

Ayaana, the protagonist, functions as both focalizer and linguistic mediator, her consciousness oscillating between the intimate idioms of Pate Island and the alienating discourse of global modernity. This multiplicity of voices reflects Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossia, the coexistence of multiple, often competing languages and social voices within a single text. In Owuor's hands, heteroglossia becomes an aesthetic and political strategy to critique the homogenizing rhetoric of the postcolonial state.

Owuor's linguistic texture is deeply symbolic. The novel's intermingling of Swahili idioms, Quranic phrases, and poetic English serves not merely as ornamentation but as acts of cultural remembrance. Language becomes a repository of identity, carrying traces of precolonial and transoceanic histories.

In scenes set in Pate, the rhythm of Swahili infuses the prose with musicality and oral resonance. For example, the invocation of sea imagery, "the ocean whispered names older than the world," is not only poetic but also a gesture toward the orature of the Swahili coast, where storytelling, rhythm, and repetition constitute a linguistic performance of belonging.

As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argued in *Decolonising the Mind*, language is both a tool of domination and a site of liberation. Owuor's prose exemplifies this duality. While her English prose bears the legacy of colonial education, its structure and syntax resist standardization, bending English toward Swahili and Arabic rhythms. This linguistic hybridity functions as a decolonial act, transforming the colonial language into a medium of African expressivity and spiritual depth.

Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the *polyphonic novel*, one where multiple voices and ideological positions coexist without being subordinated to a single authoritative perspective, is central to Owuor's narration of the Kenyan state.

The Dragonfly Sea is populated by diverse social voices: fishermen, imams, bureaucrats, Chinese envoys, and young migrants. Their voices represent the fragmented discursivity of the Kenyan nation, a polyphony of identities, languages, and memories that defy the monologic nationalism of post-independence rhetoric.

Through this polyphonic structure, Owuor re-narrates the Kenyan nation as a contested linguistic field rather than a unified nation. The sea itself functions as a narrative metaphor for multiplicity, its tides echoing the ebb and flow of cultures and tongues across the Indian Ocean. In narratological terms, the sea becomes a *metadiegetic space*, a site where competing histories (African, Arab, Chinese) converge, overlap, and reconfigure Kenya's place in the world (Genette, 1980).

Ayaana's journey to China dramatizes the crisis of linguistic and cultural dislocation. Once abroad, she encounters a world that views her not as an individual but as a symbol of Africa's peripheral modernity. Her Kenyan identity, once grounded in the musical cadences of Swahili and the oral histories of Pate, becomes fragmented.

Owuor renders this disorientation through shifts in narrative voice and stylistic register. The lyrical tone that characterizes Pate gives way to a clinical, alienating diction in China, mirroring the protagonist's loss of linguistic and cultural anchorage. In narratological terms, this shift reflects what Bal (1997) calls *semantic focalization*: a transformation in the narrator's linguistic perception that encodes emotional alienation.

The linguistic estrangement in China exposes the postcolonial paradox of globalization: that even as language promises mobility, it also enforces hierarchies of comprehension and recognition. Ayaana's silence becomes a metaphor for the subaltern's untranslatability, a theme resonant with Spivak's (1988) question, *Can the subaltern speak?* In Owuor's world, the subaltern can speak, but her speech is continually appropriated or misread by global powers.

Owuor juxtaposes the lyrical, hybridized language of the coast with the bureaucratic idiom of the Kenyan state, exposing how official discourse perpetuates alienation. The state's language, marked by English acronyms, bureaucratese, and development jargon, epitomizes what Fairclough (1995) terms *institutional discourse*: impersonal, dehumanizing, and ideologically saturated.

When government officials speak of "youth empowerment," "development corridors," or "strategic partnership with China," Owuor's irony renders these phrases hollow, detached from the lived realities of citizens. The *narrative voice* here becomes satirical, undermining the monologic authority of the state's linguistic performance.

Through this interplay of registers, Owuor performs what Genette (1980) describes as *narrative mood modulation*: shifts in narrative tone that reflect the ethical distance between the narrator and the events narrated. This stylistic heterogeneity transforms *The Dragonfly Sea* into a linguistic critique of the Kenyan state's postcolonial mimicry, its adoption of global neoliberal discourse at the expense of indigenous voice.

Ultimately, Owuor uses linguistic hybridity to re-narrate the Kenyan state from the periphery. The coastal community of Pate, historically marginalized in national discourse,

becomes the novel's moral and imaginative center. Its languages which include Swahili, Arabic, and fragments of poetic chant, restore the plural heritage of Kenya's nationhood, challenging the monolingual nationalism inherited from colonial governance.

This re-centering aligns with Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "Third Space", a liminal zone where hybrid identities and languages negotiate meaning beyond colonial binaries. Owuor's narrative inhabits this space: neither entirely national nor global, neither English nor Swahili, but a dialogic mixture that reflects the dynamic plurality of Kenyan identity.

The sea's linguistic rhythm, its repetitions, silences, and shifts, symbolizes Kenya's ongoing re-articulation of selfhood. Through narratological devices such as embedded stories, shifting focalization, and temporal disjunctions, Owuor constructs the Kenyan state not as a monolithic structure but as an unfolding narrative, a living discourse of people, voices, and memories.

Through narratological complexity and linguistic hybridity, *The Dragonfly Sea* performs the postcolonial re-narration of the Kenyan state. Owuor's manipulation of voice, tone, and narrative structure transforms language itself into a political site: a space where history, identity, and nationhood are constantly reimagined.

Her use of multiple linguistic registers (English, Swahili, Quranic Arabic) mirrors Kenya's hybrid national consciousness and foregrounds the contradictions of the postcolonial project: inclusion versus exclusion, memory versus modernity, voice versus silence. In reconfiguring the nation as a *polyphonic narrative* rather than a singular story, Owuor not only deconstructs the colonial legacy of language but also offers a new vision of Kenya, fluid, diverse, and defiantly plural.

3.4 Naming and Labelling of the State and its Institutions

Naming in literature, as scholars have emphasized, is not merely a technical or referential act but a creative and interpretive one. It is embedded in intertextual networks and social meanings that enrich narrative complexity (Nicolaisen, 2008). This study of names in literature to uncover meanings is called literary onomastics, and although historically underexplored, offers a valuable entry point into the layered world of symbolic expression, where names carry cultural, ideological, and aesthetic weight. Butler (2010) argues that names, whether of people, places, or events, function not only as identifiers but as devices that anchor texts within specific cultural and historical frameworks. In *Nairobi Heat*, Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ deploys language, and particularly naming, as a subtle but potent tool for narrating nationhood, identity, and racial geography across both American and Kenyan contexts. For instance, a place name such as "Maple Bluff" signals more than geographic location for it serves as a critique of whiteness, racial segregation, and liberal American exceptionalism.

The name "Maple Bluff" exemplifies this symbolic layering. On the surface, it invokes images of Northern serenity and racial purity, as "maple" evokes associations with temperate, orderly environments, often tied to whiteness and respectability. Meanwhile, "bluff" signifies both elevation and façade hence suggesting separation as well as the possibility of deception. Together, the name constructs a serene and affluent suburban fantasy that Mukoma purposefully undermines by placing the body of a murdered Black girl within its bounds. This jarring placement weakens the perceived innocence of white liberal spaces and critiques their complicity in masking systemic violence (Nkansah & Bonsu, 2024). Through this contrast, Mukoma satirizes the racial geography of America,

where whiteness is equated with safety and moral superiority, even as it perpetuates structural exclusion.

Furthermore, “Maple Bluff” is not an entirely fictional construct for it is also the name of a real upper-class suburb in Wisconsin in the United States. By invoking this real-world referent, Mukoma situates his critique within American realism, pointing to how racial inequality is not merely thematic, but spatially encoded. In this sense, names function metonymically, standing in for broader ideological structures. As Smith (2005) notes, literary analysis must prioritize the artistic function of language, including names, over mere structural form. The significance of “Maple Bluff” lies not in its surface prettiness but in its function as a narrative device that exposes the racialized fault lines beneath manicured exteriors.

This approach to naming reflects the broader logic of literary onomastics, which, according to Wamitila (1999), imbues names with pragmatic, semantic, and symbolic weight. Characters and places’ names do not merely serve to individuate but to perform ideological and cultural work. Within *Nairobi Heat,* the strategic deployment of names reflects the novel’s transnational concerns which include post-9/11 surveillance, racial profiling, and the lingering legacies of colonialism. Naming thus becomes a mode of narrating the Kenyan state in global relation, that is, a state shaped not only by internal tensions but also by its entanglement in global circuits of race and power. Mukoma’s language use invites readers to interrogate the spatial and symbolic geographies of violence, both in Nairobi and the United States.

Continuing the analysis of *Nairobi Heat* through the lens of literary onomastics and symbolic geography, the reference to Texas early in the novel emerges as a significant

narrative and ideological device. Mukoma's decision to identify the white passengers arriving in Kenya as Texans is not arbitrary; rather, it is a deliberate act of narrative coding that amplifies the novel's critique of American imperialism, racial hegemony, and post-9/11 global power relations. In this way, language, especially place names, serves not just as setting, but as symbolic terrain that communicates ideological tensions.

Texas, both as a place and as a cultural construct, is often imagined as the heartland of American conservatism, evangelical Christian values, gun culture, and economic prowess (particularly oil wealth). Its mention in *Nairobi Heat* thus evokes a powerful ideological shorthand: white, wealthy, and hegemonic America (Nkansah & Bonsu, 2024). By naming the passengers not just as Americans but specifically as Texans, Mukoma draws on a set of associations that underscore their cultural and political weight. This rhetorical move reflects what Butler (2010) calls the "framing power" of names, which orient the reader toward particular interpretive paths and social critiques.

The encounter between the white Texans and the African setting foregrounds a global racial and economic hierarchy. Their mobility and the ease with which they traverse African space stands in stark contrast to the constrained movements of Ishmael, the Black detective, whose transnational journey to the United States is fraught with racial surveillance and suspicion. This asymmetry reflects the neo-colonial dynamic in which the West maintains ideological and economic dominance over African nations through tourism, charity, or extractive business ventures. In this light, Texas is not merely a geographic marker; it symbolizes a neo-imperial subjectivity that assumes entitlement over foreign (often Black) spaces.

Moreover, Mukoma employs satirical reversal to disrupt the reader's expectations. Instead of African characters being stereotyped, it is the white Texans who are cast in familiar, exaggerated roles as loud, culturally oblivious, and patronizing. This device recalls the importance of language's artistic function in literature, as emphasized by Smith (2005), who argues that the symbolic use of names can destabilize dominant narratives. Mukoma's portrayal of Texans invites readers, especially those from the West, to confront uncomfortable truths about how they are perceived outside their borders.

There is also a foreshadowing effect embedded in this naming choice. The early appearance of the white Texans sets the stage for the novel's unfolding critique of racialized global relations. Their presence contrasts sharply with Ishmael's experience in the United States, where he faces alienation and suspicion. In this juxtaposition, the transnational colour line becomes starkly visible: white mobility is normalized, even welcomed, while Black mobility is policed and politicized. The naming of "Texas" thus becomes a discursive site where narratives of freedom, power, and surveillance intersect.

Finally, on Texas, the place functions as a metaphor for American exceptionalism; an ideology rooted in frontier mythology, rugged individualism, and the belief in the United State's inherent global leadership. Mukoma critiques this ideology by showing its contradictions: the very people who represent this "superior" nation are complicit in the violence, ignorance, and racial arrogance that perpetuate inequality on a global scale. As Wamitila (1999) notes, names in literature often carry semantic and symbolic depth that contribute to the overall ideological architecture of a narrative. In this case, "Texas" becomes a synecdoche for a global order built on racial and economic hierarchies.

In Sum, the naming of Texas in *Nairobi Heat* is not a neutral act of geographical reference but a symbolic intervention. It signals the novel's sustained engagement with the politics of race, movement, and global inequality. By encoding such meaning into a single place name, Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ exemplifies the power of literary naming to interrogate, invert, and reframe dominant narratives, thereby affirming literary onomastics as a vital method of critical inquiry.

The name Lord Thompson in *Nairobi Heat* is far from a neutral character label; it is a deliberately charged symbol through which Mukoma explores the legacies of colonialism, white entitlement, and the moral contradictions of the postcolonial Kenyan state. Drawing from both historical intertextuality and literary irony, Mukoma uses the figure of Lord Thompson to critique how colonial structures endure in postcolonial governance, justice, and race relations.

The name "Lord Thompson" carries immediate historical resonance with Joseph Thomson, the Scottish explorer who gave his name to Thomson's Falls in Nyahururu, Kenya. Thomson is symbolic of the colonial tendency to name and thus claim African spaces, contributing to a myth of discovery that erases indigenous presence (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Furthermore, Lord Thompson invokes Lord Delamere, a key figure in settler colonialism, whose landholdings in Naivasha and acquittals for violent crimes against Africans encapsulate the racial impunity of colonial justice.

By referencing both figures, Mukoma positions Lord Thompson as an embodiment of white privilege and legal immunity, who inherits not only land but also the symbolic capital of colonial dominance (Mukoma, 2009, p. 110). His character embodies the residual structures of colonialism within Kenya's supposedly independent institutions.

Lord Thompson's self-description when he says, "My DNA is from my white parents, my skin is white, but my soul is African" (Mukoma, 2009, p. 111), satirizes the colonial trope of the white man who 'knows Africa' better than Africans. This familiar rhetoric of benevolent colonialism masks deeper forms of structural violence. His patronizing reference to Ishmael as possibly descended from "an African prince" reduces African identity to romanticized nobility, thus erasing the complex socio-political realities of African lives (Achebe, 1977).

Lord Thompson's Africanist performance through quoting Swahili proverbs and referring to O as "brother", is a strategy of symbolic appropriation. It attempts to coat colonial privilege in cultural familiarity, rendering him simultaneously foreign and local, dominant and belonging.

Thompson brags of being "acquitted twice", once in self-defence and once accidentally, by a white judge, thereby exposing the continuity of racial bias in the post-independence legal system (Mukoma, 2009, p. 112). His freedom after multiple killings mirrors historical cases like that of Lord Delamere, who similarly escaped legal consequence under colonial rule.

Mukoma uses this narrative detail to foreground the ironies of postcolonial justice: though Kenya has undergone constitutional and administrative transitions, colonial hierarchies persist, enabling white characters to escape accountability while black characters like Ishmael and O remain entangled in precarious systems of suspicion and constraint.

Lord Thompson's invocation of *Moby-Dick* when he poses the question: "Where is your white whale?" brings into focus a layered intertextual irony (Mukoma, 2009, p. 110). In Melville's novel, Ishmael is the observer and survivor, while Ahab is the obsessive seeker of destruction. Lord Thompson miscasts Ishmael Fofona as Ahab, projecting his own obsession and blindness onto the African protagonist. This misreading mirrors broader colonial misapprehensions of African agency.

Moreover, Thompson's suggestion that Ishmael must have royal ancestry reflects a flattening of African identity into either exotic nobility or violent potential, exposing how naming becomes a form of ideological control (Said, 1993).

The scenes in Lord Thompson's estate position him as a symbolic gatekeeper of information and access. From his estate, he directs Ishmael to the next clue, reinforcing his privileged position in the epistemological order of the novel. Even in a narrative supposedly centred on African characters, Thompson's whiteness and wealth render him a narrative hinge around which other characters move. His estate, suggestive of settler manors, represents the material and symbolic persistence of colonial spatial hierarchies. The estate is not only a site of wealth and insulation but also of knowledge production, reinforcing the idea that even in independent Kenya, whiteness mediates access to truth and justice.

Names like Pineapple Town, the Hilton Hotel, and the Timbuktu Bar are loaded with historical, political, and ideological significance. These spaces become sites of narrative irony and spatial contradiction, revealing the deep entanglements between Kenya's colonial past, its neoliberal present, and the submerged truths of its postcolonial condition. Through them, Mukoma performs a form of ideological cartography, mapping

how memory, race, class, and global capital continue to shape Kenyan spatial and symbolic realities.

Pineapple Town, a fictional space that mirrors the real-life town of Thika, encapsulates Kenya's colonial past and post-industrial stagnation. Thika was once known as the "Birmingham of Kenya," a hub of colonial industry and segregated settlement patterns. Mukoma's naming of the town as "Pineapple Town" is not merely descriptive; it invokes the legacy of extractive agrarian capitalism rooted in settler history. Originally dominated by white landowners like the Harries family and later absorbed by the multinational corporation Del Monte, the town is emblematic of the logic of imperial and corporate conquest.

This rural outpost, seemingly peripheral, is in fact central to the postcolonial Kenyan narrative. It reveals how global capital persists in the afterlives of colonial land appropriation, and how spaces once marked by settler dominance remain haunted by racial and economic inequality. The fact that O chooses to take Ishmael to this location immediately after his arrival from the United States, rather than to central Nairobi, carries symbolic weight. It becomes an initiation journey into the suppressed memories of the nation, a kind of descent into the "real Kenya," as O puts it: "Here you get a taste of the real Africa." This moment resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorisation of the subaltern space zones rendered invisible by elite discourse but saturated with silenced histories and resistant knowledges (Spivak, 1988).

Perhaps the most ironic naming in the novel is that of the Hilton Hotel, situated within Pineapple Town. In global consciousness, the Hilton brand evokes luxury, opulence, and international status. The real Hilton Hotel in Nairobi, towering over the city's central

business district, stands as a monument to corporate modernity and elite globalism. Mukoma's "Hilton," however, is a grotesque parody of this promise.

The Pineapple Town Hilton is "lit by kerosene lamps," exudes the stench of "gasoline and burning cloth," and is populated by the "living dead" men drunk, slumped over, and disillusioned. This setting deliberately undercuts the global signifier of affluence with a local reality of decay. Mukoma deploys this naming to expose the mirage of development in postcolonial Africa. It echoes Achille Mbembe's critique of the simulacrum of progress in the postcolony, a performance of modernity that masks a deeper rot (Mbembe, 2001). The Hilton becomes not a place of aspiration, but a cruel joke, an aspirational brand applied to a crumbling structure, much like postcolonial states branded as modern while structurally trapped in neocolonial dependence.

In contrast, the Timbuktu Bar, located in the Nairobi neighbourhood of Eastleigh, gestures toward Africa's intellectual and cultural past. Timbuktu was once a vibrant centre of Islamic learning and scholarship in West Africa, a city that symbolised African self-sufficiency, cosmopolitanism, and knowledge production. But in contemporary Western discourse, "Timbuktu" has been reduced to a metaphor for remoteness, obscurity, or even fundamentalism.

Mukoma's naming of a dingy bar in Eastleigh as "Timbuktu" is thick with irony. Eastleigh itself is a marginalized space associated with Somali migration, informal economies, and security crackdowns. Its symbolic remoteness within the urban imaginary of Nairobi mirrors the semantic shift of "Timbuktu" from knowledge capital to backwater. The bar thus reflects a double erasure, that of African intellectual grandeur

and of urban African communities caught in global circuits of suspicion and marginalisation.

This act of naming becomes a form of lamentation and critique. It memorialises a once-celebrated African legacy even as it satirises the current condition in which such legacies are ignored, distorted, or violently policed. Mukoma turns the Timbuktu Bar into a site of ironic nostalgia, mourning not only the fall of a city but the ideological devaluation of African epistemes (African traditions of knowledge in oral literature, philosophy, history, language, spirituality, and indigenous science) in both global and local discourses.

The journey taken by Ishmael, from Jomo Kenyatta International Airport to Pineapple Town and later to Eastleigh, traces a postcolonial geography of contradiction. These locations, ironically named after elite or historical sites, form a narrative arc that critiques the layers of Kenya's contemporary condition. The mismatch between name and reality with Hilton as slum, Timbuktu as bar, Pineapple Town as site of decay, highlights the disjuncture between symbolic capital and material life.

This spatial irony echoes Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, where names are not fixed in meaning but are always haunted by traces of violence, irony, and historical disjunction (Derrida, 1967). Names in Nairobi Heat do not merely refer; they betray, mock, and lament. They expose the instability of postcolonial identity and the deep fractures between how Kenya appears on the surface and what it harbours beneath.

The use of the name Koitalel in *Nairobi Heat* is a loaded and well-thought-out act of symbolic naming, a form of postcolonial onomastics that transforms personal names into ideological signs. The name evokes Koitalel arap Samoei, the famous Nandi seer and

military leader who led a ten-year resistance against British occupation of his people's land in the Rif Valley. He was assassinated by Colonel Meinertzhagen who tricked him into a meeting under the guise of a truce. This form of betrayal remains archived in the collective memory of the people. When Mukoma gives the bank robber this name, he succeeds in drawing a deliberate line between rebellion and criminality, thus problematising the boundaries between being a hero and an outlaw, between liberator and terrorist, depending on the controller of the narrative.

In Mukoma's *Nairobi Heat*, the criminal Koitalel is presented as a folk hero not because of his crime of killing a police officer, but for symbolically taking down a Mr Henderson, colonial relic, a white officer enforcing order in post-independence Kenya. Just like his historical namesake, the Koitalel of River Road disappears after his act leaving behind a suppressed history shrouded in myth and rumour. By adding that he might have joined politics or undergone plastic surgery builds up to the allegorical role he participates in the narration of the shape-shifting nature of power in postcolonial Kenya.

In narrating Henderson's murder by Koitalel to Ismael, O's story functions as a counter-narrative to official histories, hence dramatizing Spivak's(1988) concept of the subaltern speaking. Here is an act of historical vengeance which takes place in River Road, a symbolic stage, where the oppressed finally call the oppressor by name and manage to bring him down. By calling Henderson before killing him, Koitalel reclaims narrative agency and visibility hence disrupting colonial codes of silence and fear. Mukoma deliberately chose to have the shooting take place in River Road, a part of downtown Nairobi that is characterised by informality, resistance and neglect by the state therefore transforming it to a political archive. It is in River Road that Koitalel is celebrate

signalling the people's history running parallel to the state's. Mbembe (2001) in his text *On Postcolony* asserts that there is a collapse in the line between rebel and ruler in post-independence African states. The rumour that Mukoma's Koitalel in *Nairobi Heat* may have undergone plastic surgery and joined politics is an embodiment of this metamorphose of bandit becoming bureaucrat.

In Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players,* the protagonist's name is in full is Thomas Karamu , and he introduces himself as "They call me Thomas Karamu," hence distancing himself from an identity defined by the state. His preferred name, the one used in the street by fellow hustlers and by his friends is Toma. Thomas Karamu, his official names, are used at the bank when opening his bank account after the winning, by the lawyers when he is thrown in jail on trumped up charges and by the media and the betting company when announcing him as the winner of the Jackpot. Thomas Karamu name is tied to bureaucracy, surveillance and legality, while Toma, his street name, stands for survival and used informal spaces such as the *mutura* stand; that is his source of livelihood. Naming in theses contexts reflects double consciousness where Toma exists between the formal legal identity imposed by the system and the informal and fluid identity constructed in the shadow economy. This split of consciousness echoes Fanon's theory of colonised subject's fractured self, that is trapped between imposed visibility and desired anonymity.

The setting of Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players* is Kiamatawa which translates as "City of Lights", an ironic name as the narrator notes that "there are few working street lights here". This false optimise in naming amounts to critiquing the post-colonial state's reliance on symbolic promises (light, progress and development) that

collapse under the weight of lived reality, that is darkness, insecurity and poverty. Provision of lights and electricity and development projects are usually among the promises made by the state to the citizens. Kombani's naming of the Nairobi as Kiamatawa is an example of the use of toponymy (place naming) to achieve rhetorical irony. City of lights is a hopeful metaphor however it masks structural violence that the people endure.

In labelling institutions, Kombani uses the name *Kanjo* to refer to the county police that is feared by the traders and locals. The use of the colloquial term *Kanjo* reduces an institution that should be maintaining order and ensuring fairness to traders, to a street term synonymous with fear.

Karamu means "party" or "feast" in Kiswahili and it is a name rich in irony, symbolism and social critique. Karamu evokes celebration which is ironical given that at the beginning he lived in precarity, when he used to starve, but as the novel progresses Toma manages to cheat the corrupt betting system and escape with a fortune. His name Karamu ends up being prophetic. He transitions from being a pawn in a game where he is sacrificed, to being a big piece throwing his own party. His name, therefore, becomes a symbol of poetic justice where justice initially denied through formal channels ends up being served. However, the party is not entirely joyful as he, Thomas, ends up escaping alone and the party comes at the cost of a shattered moral order, corruption, and betrayal. Karamu could be taken as a metaphor for a society where justice is served privately and a situation where someone has to lose for another to celebrate.

In Kombanis's *Of Pawns and Players*, names are not for mere identification but rather serve as political narration. To be given a name is to be placed on a map of power, as a

citizen, a suspect, an insider or outcast. Therefore, through naming, Kombani constructs a language that both resists and reveals state violence.

Mr. Walaki's name, the owner of the betting firm, has been used symbolically in Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players.* Through the name Walaki, Kombani critiques the deep entanglement between the Kenyan state and corporate capitalism. The betting firm Walaki runs is not just a private enterprise, for it mirrors the failures of the state to provide economic security. In this sense, Walaki becomes a proxy for the Kenyan state itself, which, rather than protecting its citizens, facilitates their economic exploitation. His name, derived from "lucky," ironically encodes the false promises of state-led development in an era when public goods have been outsourced to private capital.

This onomastic strategy aligns with a broader narrative tendency among Kenya's third-generation authors such as Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor who use names to explore the relationship between personal identity and national disorder. As Ochieng' (2014) notes, these authors often present the state not as a protector but as an apparatus of surveillance, dispossession, and moral ambiguity. Walaki, whose wealth is built on the commodification of dreams, encapsulates this critique through his name that signifies both promise and betrayal, capturing the state's complicity in citizen marginalization.

The symbolic naming of Walaki also illustrates how neoliberal ideology naturalizes itself through language. Just as "development," "opportunity," or "empowerment" are used to sanitize extractive policies, so too does the name Walaki sanitize predation by evoking luck and meritocracy. Literary onomastics here reveals how names function as ideological devices, shaping reader perception while exposing contradictions in Kenya's

postcolonial project. Naming, in this context, becomes not just character construction, but nation narration.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor deploys naming as a profound narrative strategy for negotiating identity, belonging, and the Kenyan nation-state. As characters traverse geographies, cultures, and emotional landscapes, names become more than mere identifiers; they function as sites of memory, resistance, and self-fashioning. Through characters like Munira, Muhidin, Ayaana, and the foreigners who arrive on Pate Island, Owuor constructs a layered commentary on the politics of identity in a postcolonial Kenyan context. Naming becomes a literary and political act, one that foregrounds the characters' struggles with alienation, historical amnesia, and the search for rootedness in a fragmented world.

At the heart of the *Dragon fly Sea* is the tension between alienation and the longing for belonging. Munira, feeling estranged from the state and from the conventional markers of family and identity, gives herself and her daughter a new name: Wa Jauza, a reference to Orion, the star constellation. The gesture is both mythopoetic and psychological. According to Wellek and Warren (1949), motivation in literature is "that which increases the illusion of reality," and in this case, Munira uses the illusion of naming to construct a semblance of family and stability. "Wa Jauza" functions not only as a symbolic anchor in the vast, unmoored ocean of the self but also as a performative tool for integrating into the broader idea of the nation. By giving her daughter a name that evokes cosmic permanence and ancestry, Munira lays a claim to identity where the state has failed to offer one. Years later, Ayaana adopts this name in her passport while traveling to China,

further showing how names can carry constructed but enduring realities into national and transnational domains.

In Pate, Owuor documents a long-standing tradition of renaming foreigners upon their arrival—an act that signifies their incorporation into the social and political body of the island. Lai Jin becomes Nahodha Jamal, a title connoting maritime leadership and dignity. Similarly, Mzee Kitwana Kipifit is given a quasi-comic name, reflecting both his habits and the community's right to assign meaning to his presence. Even Delaksha, in death, is buried with an added name: Ra'abia, a deeply symbolic gesture marking spiritual and social integration.

This ritual naming acts as a surrogate for official citizenship, echoing what Nkansah and Bonsu (2024) call the shaping of identity through names that carry connotations influencing perception and meaning. These renamed foreigners do not merely receive names but rather receive belonging. Owuor thus critiques the Kenyan state's rigid, often exclusionary national narratives by contrasting it with Pate's more fluid, historically layered form of inclusion through naming.

Naming also becomes a site of ideological contestation. When Lai Jin's ship *MV Qingrui* is renamed *MV Guolong* ("Dragon of the Nation"), it signals a shift from personal meaning to state-sponsored ideology. Lai Jin mourns the loss of the ideal name, *Qingrui*, which for him connotes purity and individuality. The renaming, however, binds the ship to China's national mythos, projecting state power and myth onto a personal voyage. As Butler (2010) argues, names, whether of people or objects, can situate narratives within broader ideological frameworks, and here Owuor uses renaming to highlight how national discourses appropriate and reshape personal histories.

Ayaana's debate in China about the name of the Indian Ocean furthers this theme. While Ari, the Indian student, insists on the term "Indian Ocean," Ayaana claims Ziwa Kuu, "the vast sea," a name rooted in Swahili and thus African epistemology. Both attempts at asserting national ideology are dismissed by the Chinese teacher, who renames it the Western Ocean, revealing the hierarchies of naming in a global context. This moment crystallizes Owuor's concern with how names act as proxies for geopolitical power. As Nicolaisen (2008) notes, naming in literature often evokes layered meanings that can signal cultural dominance, marginalization, or resistance. Ayaana's insistence on "Ziwa Kuu" becomes a quiet but defiant assertion of a Kenyan presence in a global narrative that seeks to overwrite it.

Perhaps the most allegorical use of naming occurs in the renaming of Shanghai to Shanga. The omniscient narrator recounts how shipwrecked Chinese sailors six hundred years ago settled on Pate, converted to Islam, and named their new home Shanghai, after their place of origin. Over time, "time, decay, and Pate" compressed this into Shanga, a Swahili word meaning necklace. This transformation is symbolic: a name once signifying geographic memory becomes a metaphor for the emotional and historical burden borne by the people, a necklace of memory that is both adornment and prison (Owuor, 2019, p. 154).

This transformation also encapsulates Owuor's broader critique of the nation-state: memory is always under revision, names are unstable, and history is mediated through oral transmission and cultural adaptation. As Wamitila (1999) notes, names in literature carry semantic, pragmatic, and symbolic weight, and The Dragonfly Sea uses naming to evoke both the continuity and rupture of national narratives.

Ultimately, Owuor's deployment of names is not arbitrary but deeply intentional. Munira, whose name means "the radiant one," attempts to bring clarity and warmth into a life clouded by abandonment. Muhidin, meaning "reviver of the faith," mirrors the Sufi ideal of spiritual renewal, a role his character struggles to embody amid the chaos of personal and political uncertainties. Each name resonates with histories beyond the page, reinforcing Owuor's commitment to embedding Kenya's local and global entanglements within her narrative.

In *The Dragonfly Sea,* naming is a powerful narrative device through which characters negotiate identity, belonging, and nationhood. Whether by forging family through mythic naming, integrating foreigners through localized renaming practices, or confronting the ideological weight of national labels, Owuor shows that names are never neutral. They are artifacts of memory, desire, resistance, and power. In narrating the Kenyan state, The Dragonfly Sea does not present a fixed map but a shifting sea of identities, where names are buoys of meaning in the vast ocean of history and imagination.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how third-generation Kenyan writers, Mukoma wa Ngugi, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and Kinyanjui Kombani, strategically deploy language to critique, expose, and reimagine the postcolonial Kenyan nation. Through their linguistic choices, these authors reveal the fractures within the nation, highlight socio-political injustices, and foreground the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

One key insight is the use of distinct language registers to reflect and differentiate social classes. In *Of Pawns and Players*, Kombani weaves together street slang, Sheng, and Standard English to convey the disparities between Nairobi's underclass and the political

elite, capturing both the resilience and disillusionment of the urban poor. Similarly, in *Nairobi Heat*, Mukoma wa Ngugi juxtaposes the formal discourse of state institutions with the colloquial, world-weary voice of the narrator, exposing the hypocrisy and complicity of state power across transnational contexts. Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* adopts a more lyrical and poetic register, using elevated language that often blurs into the spiritual and symbolic to explore the relationship between the individual, the nation, and cultural identity.

Furthermore, the chapter has demonstrated how literary onomastics, particularly the naming and labelling of characters, institutions, and places, serves as a powerful ideological device. Kombani's choice of names often mirrors political stereotypes and corruption, turning state actors into symbolic placeholders for systemic failure. Mukoma's naming practices subtly blend African and diasporic identities to critique both Kenyan and global nation violence. Owuor, meanwhile, employs evocative and historically loaded names to root nation narratives in deeper cultural memory, suggesting both rupture and continuity in the nation's evolution.

Across the three texts, naming becomes an act of political signification, where the language used to refer to the nation, its agents, and its citizens is never neutral. Whether through satirical titles, ambiguous institutional labels, or the erasure of official nomenclature, these authors challenge dominant representations of power and open up space for alternative imaginaries.

The language in these third-generation texts is not only a medium of storytelling but also a terrain of ideological struggle. Through register variation and onomastic choices, the

authors confront the exclusions, violences, and mythologies of the Kenyan nation, making visible what is often hidden and giving voice to those at its margins.

CHAPTER FOUR

TECHNIQUES OF NARRATION IN THE SELECTED THIRD-GENERATION WORKS OF FICTION

4. 1 Introduction

Techniques of narration refer to the structural and narrative strategies an author employs in telling a story, such as point of view, narrative voice, and temporal structure (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Genette (1980, p.31) explains that "Narrative discourse is not to be confused with its language style; techniques of narration concern the relation between story and discourse: who sees? who speaks? when? from what distance? Literary tropes such as metaphor belong to the stylistic level."

Examining the techniques of narration is essential for understanding how meaning, perspective, and ideology are constructed in a literary text. In this section, the techniques of narration examined include the point of view, the narrative voice, the temporal structure and binary oppositions.

4.2 Point of view

Point of view refers to the perspective from which a story is told, that is, whose eyes and mind the reader is aligned with, and what information is available to the reader Rimmon-Kenan, (2002). Mukoma wa Ngugi, in *Nairobi Heat,* opts for a first-person narrator, Ishmael, an African American detective from the United States who travels to Kenya in search of answers to a murder case. This choice of a diasporic protagonist is crucial as it immediately establishes a diasporic lens of cultural estrangement and through which Kenya is seen, often with surprise, irony, and contradiction. The introspective narration allows the readers to inhabit Ishmael's fragmented relationship with Africa which is

revealed when he says, "It was the land of my ancestors; a place I vaguely longed for without really wanting to belong to it."

This reveals the emotional and psychological alienation that characterizes the African diaspora. The narrator's internal monologue, full of unease, confusion, and eventual awe, mirrors the larger identity crisis that Mukoma wants us to examine though an interrogation of what Africa means to Black Americans? How is it imagined and misimagined? Gilroy (1993) This narrative strategy reflects what Gilroy (1993) refers to as the "double consciousness" of the Black Atlantic subject, simultaneously drawn to and distanced from Africa.

The fragmented voice of Ishmael mirrors the larger identity crisis of the African diaspora, as he grapples with the mythic and material realities of Africa. Mukoma therefore, uses narration to interrogate how Africa is imagined and misimagined by Black Americans, destabilising essentialist conceptions of African identity.

Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players* similarly employs a first-person narrator, Thomas (or Toma), but unlike Ishmael, Toma is an ordinary Kenyan hustler whose experience is grounded in the everyday urban struggle. Kombani's narrative begins with a disorienting act of violence, "Smack! It catches me by surprise," and thrusts the reader into the chaotic immediacy of Nairobi's informal economy. Toma's voice is intimate, humorous, and satirical, filled with streetwise observations and linguistic hybridity. This vernacular narrative style allows Kombani to portray the Kenyan nation not as a monolithic institution but as an arbitrary and often brutal force that preys on the urban poor. "These must be police officers, I figure. Only police officers have the audacity to

handle citizens the way these people are handling me," Toma observes, highlighting the normalized violence and impunity of state agents.

Where Mukoma constructs a critical distance through the diasporic gaze, Kombani collapses that distance by immersing the reader in the lived experience of nation neglect and abuse. The Kenyan nation, in Kombani's depiction, is not merely absent but actively harmful. This aligns with Mbembe's (2001) concept of the "postcolony," in which the state exerts a grotesque and spectacular violence that both dominates and degrades its citizens. Kombani's use of satire and irony, coupled with his vivid portrayal of the urban poor's daily negotiations with authority, critiques the betrayal of independence-era promises and the failures of contemporary governance.

Both writers also employ stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue to convey psychological fragmentation and moral ambiguity. Ishmael's internal reflections on race, belonging, and justice mirror Toma's confused and fearful thoughts as he is assaulted and abducted by unknown state agents. In both cases, the first-person narration offers access to the characters' vulnerabilities, exposing the human cost of a dysfunctional state apparatus.

Furthermore, these narratives challenge dominant national myths by foregrounding marginal voices. Mukoma questions the romanticized return to Africa narrative, while Kombani destabilizes the myth of Nairobi as a "city of lights," pointing instead to a world of broken streetlamps, corrupt law enforcement, and economic precarity. As Musila (2015) notes, contemporary African crime fiction often "unsettles the coherence of the postcolonial state by revealing the contradictions between legality and justice". Both

Nairobi Heat and *Of Pawns and Players* exemplify this trend, using the detective genre and urban realism, respectively, to critique state power.

The emergence of third-generation Kenyan writers has marked a significant shift in the representation of the nation and its relationship with citizens. These writers, born after independence and shaped by the neoliberal and often dystopian realities of contemporary Kenya, offer powerful critiques of governance, social stratification, and national identity. Through distinct narrative techniques, authors such as Mukoma wa Ngugi and Kinyanjui Kombani expose the contradictions, violence, and failures of the postcolonial nation.

These third-generation Kenyan writers like Mukoma wa Ngugi and Kinyanjui Kombani narrate the state through techniques that expose its violence, contradictions, and moral failures. Whether through the diasporic estrangement of Ishmael or the street-level immediacy of Toma, these writers centre marginalized perspectives and challenge the legitimacy of postcolonial governance. Their use of first-person narration, introspection, irony, and satire not only humanizes their characters but also indicts the systems that dehumanize them.

In *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019), Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor similarly demonstrates how narrative point of view can be effective in narrating the nation. She employs a sophisticated combination of point of view and narrative voice to explore themes of diasporic longing, belonging, and identity within the Indian Ocean world. These narrative techniques serve not only to convey the intimate experiences of the protagonist, Ayaana, but also to situate her personal story within broader cultural and historical currents. As Rimmon-Kenan (2002) observes, point of view refers to "the perceptual or conceptual position in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented" (p. 72), while

narrative voice concerns "the agent who speaks or tells the story" (p. 89). In this excerpt, Owuor masterfully manipulates both elements, using a third-person omniscient point of view with shifting focalization and a richly lyrical narrative voice to create a textured, immersive narrative experience.

The point of view in the passage is primarily third-person omniscient, allowing the narrative to fluidly transition between an expansive, external perspective and the inner consciousness of specific characters. The opening paragraph exemplifies this with a wide-angle, almost cosmic vantage: “To cross the vast ocean to their south, water-chasing dragonflies with forebears in Northern India had hitched a ride on a sedate ‘in-between seasons’ morning wind…” (Owuor, 2019, p. 1). This sweeping perspective establishes a thematic concern with diasporic movement and deep time. The focalization then narrows to Ayaana’s point of view, immersing the reader in her imaginative, childlike perception of the storm and the sea: “She decided that these were a monster’s footsteps, a monster whose strides left streaks of pink light on the sky” (Owuor, 2019, p. 3). According to Genette (1980), such shifts in focalization enable the narrative to “vary the field and depth of perception” (p. 189), allowing readers to oscillate between collective and individual experiences. The later transition into the mind of the Nanjing traveller similarly broadens the narrative’s scope, embedding Ayaana’s local story within a global diasporic framework: “The traveller blinked, uneasy and engulfed by redolent evening scents…” (Owuor, 2019, p. 9).

Complementing this flexible point of view is Owuor’s distinctive narrative voice, marked by its lyrical, sensuous, and mythic qualities. The narrative tone oscillates between an elevated poetic register and intimate immediacy. The early description of Pate Island, for

instance, blends historical trauma with mythic resonance: “Pate Town marked melancholic time. A leaden sky poured dull-red light over a crowd of petulant ghosts…” (Owuor, 2019, p. 2). Such passages evoke a haunted, living landscape, where the past permeates the present. When focalized through Ayaana, the voice adopts a playful yet poignant tone, reflecting her inner world: “She whispered to [the kitten], *‘Haidhuri’,* which means “Don’t mind” (Owuor, 2019, p. 6). This narrative strategy aligns with what Rimmon-Kenan (2002) describes as the modulation of voice to match the focalized character’s psychological state (p. 89). In contrast, the traveller’s internal perspective is rendered in a more reflective, existential voice, highlighting his sense of estrangement: “Here were the rustlings of ghosts. Here was the lonely humming of those who had died far from home…” (Owuor, 2019, p. 9). Through such shifts, the narrative voice foregrounds the characters’ emotional and cultural dislocation, reinforcing the novel’s exploration of diasporic identity and cultural hybridity.

In sum, Owuor’s sophisticated deployment of point of view and narrative voice in this excerpt from *The Dragonfly Sea* exemplifies the narrative’s thematic ambitions. By oscillating between a mythic, panoramic perspective and the intimate consciousness of characters, the text constructs a multi-scalar sense of belonging and dislocation. This technique not only deepens the reader’s engagement with Ayaana’s personal journey but also situates her story within the larger historical and cultural dynamics of the Indian Ocean world. As Genette (1980) and Rimmon-Kenan (2002) suggest, such narrative strategies are central to shaping both meaning and reader experience in fiction. In Owuor’s case, they render *The Dragonfly Sea* a resonant meditation on memory, identity, and the fluid boundaries of home.

4.3 Narrative voice

Alongside point of view, narrative voice emerges as a crucial technique through which third-generation Kenyan writers interrogate state power, identity, and belonging. Distinct from point of view which governs whose eyes the reader sees through narrative voice concerns the style, tone, and rhythm with which the story is told (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). The ways in which Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019), Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* (2009), and Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players* (2015) employ narrative voice exemplify a larger aesthetic and political project: narrating the Kenyan nation and its contradictions through diverse, often hybrid voices. Each of these works deploys narrative voice not only to shape the reader's experience but also to foreground the layered relationships between the individual and the nation-state.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, Owuor employs a lyrical, sensuous, and mythic narrative voice that oscillates between a timeless, cosmic register and moments of intimate immediacy. Through this modulation of voice, Owuor deepens the novel's exploration of cultural hybridity, historical memory, and the porous boundaries of identity in the Indian Ocean world. The novel's opening paragraphs establish a mythic tone, blending scientific fact with poetic imagery to evoke a landscape alive with memory: *"The matlai conspired with a shimmering full moon to charge the island…"* (Owuor, 2019, p. 1). Here, the voice infuses the natural environment with agency and mystery, foregrounding the island's layered histories and participation in transoceanic flows. The lyricism of this voice transforms setting into a carrier of both historical trauma and possibility, positioning Pate Island as a space where past and present continually intersect.

When the narrative focalizes through Ayaana, the protagonist, the voice shifts toward a playful, childlike tone while maintaining poetic resonance: *"She whispered to it, 'Haidhuru'* which means *Don't mind"* (Owuor, 2019, p. 6). This modulation mirrors Ayaana's innocence and curiosity, drawing readers into her subjective experience. As Rimmon-Kenan (2002) observes, such shifts in voice enrich emotional resonance and deepen reader identification (p. 89). Conversely, when centred on the unnamed Nanjing traveller, the narrative voice adopts a more reflective and existential tone: *"Here were the rustlings of ghosts…"* (Owuor, 2019, p. 9). These tonal shifts capture the dissonant experiences of diasporic figures negotiating unfamiliar landscapes, reinforcing themes of estrangement and transnational entanglement. Ultimately, this sensuous, mythic voice renders the Indian Ocean world as a space of layered temporalities, where identity and belonging remain in flux; a thematic concern central to third-generation Kenyan fiction.

By contrast, *Nairobi Heat* by Mukoma wa Ngugi employs a first-person narrative voice that is intimate, reflective, ironic, and laced with subtle commentary on race, identity, and belonging. Through the voice of Ishmael, an African American detective navigating both a murder case and his own relationship with Africa, Mukoma constructs a layered, self-conscious narrative that foregrounds psychological dislocation and cultural estrangement. The blunt, journalistic style is established early: *"A beautiful young blonde was dead, and the suspect, my suspect, was an African male. I was traveling to Africa in search of his past"* (Mukoma, 2009, p. 1). However, this voice is soon complicated by introspection: *"After all it was the land of my ancestors; a place I vaguely longed for without really wanting to belong to it"* (Mukoma, 2009, p. 1). Here, Mukoma dramatizes

what Gilroy (1993) has termed the "double consciousness" of the Black Atlantic subject caught between inherited cultural memory and the realities of displacement.

The ironic tone is another defining feature. When Ishmael is called "mzungu" by a taxi driver, he reflects: *"It was a strange irony that I, an African American, a black American, was being called a white man in Africa"* (Mukoma, 2009, p. 2). This moment exposes the shifting, performative nature of racial identity. Mukoma's voice oscillates between personal vulnerability and political critique, inviting the reader to confront both the myths of Africa circulating in diasporic consciousness and the moral ambiguities of state power. As Musila (2015) observes, African crime fiction such as *Nairobi Heat* often "unsettles the coherence of the postcolonial state" by exposing contradictions between legality and justice (p. 91). The dialogic, self-reflexive voice Mukoma crafts is a key vehicle for this critique, foregrounding the tensions between personal morality and institutional corruption.

Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players* likewise employs a first-person narrative voice, but one that is intimate, streetwise, ironic, and deeply embedded in the urban realities of contemporary Kenya. Through Toma, a *mutura* vendor in the fictional slum of Kiamatawa, Kombani offers not only a portrait of personal survival but also a sharp critique of the Kenyan state's violence and corruption. The novel opens with visceral immediacy: *"Smack! It catches me by surprise. Three seconds, to be exact"* (Kombani, 2015, p. 1). This blunt, fragmented style plunges the reader into Toma's lived experience, marked by constant threats of violence and the precarity of the urban poor.

Kombani uses the voice to expose both state brutality and psychological fragmentation. Toma's ironic commentary on everyday injustices such as the lack of street lights in the

so-called "city of lights", foregrounds the grotesque contradictions of the postcolony (Mbembe, 2001). His confusion about whether he is under arrest and his instinct to submit, *"I know that by the time I stand, they will be upon me"* (Kombani, 2015, p. 3) reflects a learned compliance with arbitrary power. The narrative voice thus dramatizes not only physical violence but also the psychic scars of life under systemic oppression. As Musila (2015) notes, such narrative strategies enable African fiction to "foreground marginal voices and unsettle dominant narratives of the nation-state" (p. 92).

Kombani also employs linguistic hybridity, blending English with vernacular phrases ("*esiorori"*, "*mutura*", "*kanjo*"), thereby resisting homogenizing representations of Kenyan urban life. The narrator's metanarrative asides *"I probably should have started by telling you about myself"* (Kombani, 2015, p. 4) further reinforce an oral storytelling tradition, positioning Toma as an agent in shaping his narrative, even amid structural disenfranchisement. This ironic, vernacular voice ultimately functions as a powerful tool for exposing the failures of the postcolonial state and foregrounding the resilience of Kenya's urban poor.

In summary, these three third-generation Kenyan novels deploy distinct narrative voices to interrogate the nation, identity, and belonging. Owuor's lyrical, mythic voice in *The Dragonfly Sea* situates individual journeys within transhistorical currents; Mukoma's ironic, self-aware voice in *Nairobi Heat* dramatizes diasporic identity conflicts and critiques state justice; Kombani's streetwise, vernacular voice in *Of Pawns and Players* exposes everyday state violence and urban precarity. In each case, narrative voice serves not merely as an aesthetic device, but as a critical medium through which these writers narrate and unsettle the Kenyan nation.

4.4 Temporal structure

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) is a richly layered narrative where temporal structure functions not merely as a device for storytelling but as a crucial strategy for narrating the nation which is understood simultaneously as personal subjectivity and as the socio-political state apparatus. The novel's non-linear, cyclical, and fluid treatment of time offers a profound commentary on identity, postcolonial trauma, and the global entanglement of local lives. Through temporal layering and disruption, the text resists colonial-modernist notions of linear progress and instead proposes a more organic, spectral, and affective temporality that reflects the lived experiences of postcolonial subjects in Kenya and beyond.

Owuor's narrative structure is fundamentally non-linear and marked by temporal layering. The novel shifts constantly between personal memory, communal history, and geopolitical currents. This technique exemplifies what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) termed the chronotope; the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in narrative. In *The Dragonfly Sea*, the chronotope is shaped by Pate Island's ecology, maritime history, and the aftershocks of global modernity. The sea serves not only as setting but as an active participant in the construction of time and space.

Ayaana's story, for example, is haunted by the past: her absent father, the ancestral sea narratives, and the island's historical connections with Chinese sailors (Owuor, 2019, pp. 85–97). Flashbacks, such as Lai Jin's memories of his wife's death (Chapter 9), and Ziriyab's traumatic captivity in Diego Garcia (Chapters 25–26), disrupt linear progression and foreground the haunting nature of historical memory. Such narrative interruptions reflect postcolonial time, which is fractured by colonial violence and global disruptions

(Mbembe, 2001). Through this temporal layering, Owuor constructs what can be termed a *palimpsestic* temporality, where past and present are inscribed upon each other, destabilizing the teleological narratives of modern nationhood.

Owuor further embeds cyclical notions of time through the natural world. The sea, tides, dragonflies, and birds serve as recurrent temporal markers (Owuor, 2019, p. 123). These ecological cycles stand in deliberate contrast to the linear temporality imposed by the global capitalist state. The sea, in particular, functions as a temporal agent rather than a mere setting: "The sea remembers. It swells with memory. It knows what was lost and what will return" (Owuor, 2019, p. 271). Ayaana's father's disappearance and Ziriyab's return to the sea (Chapter 26) embody this fluid, recursive temporality.

This maritime temporality critiques nationalist projects that seek to fix identity and time. As Prestholdt (2008) has shown, East African coastal cultures have long been shaped by Indian Ocean networks that resist national boundaries. In this light, *The Dragonfly Sea* asserts a translocal temporality that situates African histories within broader maritime worlds. Through the sea, Owuor foregrounds an alternative temporality rooted in ecology and mobility rather than in the linear time of state-building and capitalist modernity.

However, this cyclical temporal order is repeatedly disrupted by global political events. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami (Chapter 7), the U.S. military's abduction of Ziriyab (Chapter 25), and the infiltration of religious extremism through characters like Fazul, represent temporal ruptures that violently insert imperial time into the island's organic rhythms (Owuor, 2019, pp. 311–319). These ruptures align with Achille Mbembe's (2001) notion of a "time of entanglement," in which postcolonial subjects live within multiple, often conflicting temporalities imposed by global capital and militarism.

Through these narrative episodes, Owuor critiques how imperial and state powers impose *foreign time* whether through forced disappearances, surveillance regimes, or ideological violence on local communities like Pate Island. The state, thus, appears as an invasive force that seeks to fracture communal time and disrupt intergenerational memory. Owuor's depiction of Ziriyab's imprisonment in a U.S. military black site explicitly dramatizes the carceral temporality of the global security state, where time is suspended and erased as a form of political violence.

At the heart of *The Dragonfly Sea* is Ayaana's coming-of-age arc, yet this Bildungsroman structure is deliberately non-linear and recursive. Her journey to China (Chapters 13–15), for instance, is constantly interrupted by reflections on home and ancestral memory. The rose petal given to Ayaana by Mzee Kitwana (Chapter 16) symbolizes how her growth is mediated by intergenerational trauma and communal histories (Owuor, 2019, p. 248).

This suggests that personal time in postcolonial contexts is always entangled with collective and historical time. Homi Bhabha (1994) has argued that postcolonial narratives often disrupt linear national time by foregrounding the *interstitial* spaces where past and present collide. Ayaana's inability to fully inhabit a linear trajectory of progress toward modernity reflects this dynamic. Owuor thus decolonizes the Bildungsroman form by refusing the conventional narrative of progress and maturity. Instead, she offers a temporality of fragmentation, return, and cyclical healing.

The novel is also steeped in mythic and spectral time. Ghosts, dreams, and omens permeate the narrative (Owuor, 2019, pp. 200–203). This temporal mode resonates with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) advocacy for indigenous narrative structures rooted in oral tradition and cyclical time. In *The Dragonfly Sea*, the spectral presence of drowned

sailors, Ayaana's prophetic dreams, and the symbolic dragonflies evoke an African temporality where time does not progress linearly, the dead remain present and active in the world of the living, and the future is shaped through ritual reworking of memory.

Such mythic time resists the modernist calendar of the state. It offers alternative ways of knowing and living that lie outside the control of bureaucratic and nationalist time. In narrative terms, this aligns with Genette's (1980) theorization of *anachrony*, where the narrative deliberately disrupts chronological order to foreground subjective and affective experiences of time.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, Owuor's temporal structure emerges as a powerful technique for narrating the state in its multiple dimensions. The novel's layered, cyclical, and spectral time exposes the ruptures of global imperialism on local life, honours indigenous and ecological temporalities that resist colonial-modern linearity, critiques nationalist and capitalist narratives that seek to erase complexity and cyclical memory, and reclaims the sea as a metaphor for transcultural histories and alternative futures.

By crafting a narrative in which time flows like the ocean as layered, recursive and spectral, Owuor offers a radically different vision of temporality. In doing so, she foregrounds the lived experience of postcolonial African subjects caught in the entangled currents of local histories and global forces. The novel thereby invites readers to rethink the politics of time and the narrative structures through which the state is imagined, contested, and remembered. The temporal structure in Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* is central to how the novel narrates the Kenyan state, not just as a setting, but as a layered historical and political reality. Through non-linear shifts in time and fragmented narrative

sequences, Mukoma foregrounds how memory, trauma, and historical continuities shape both the personal and political spheres.

The novel opens in the U.S., in a racially charged present, with the line, "A beautiful young blonde was dead, and the suspect… was an African male," immediately anchoring the reader in the present tense of American racial anxieties (Mukoma, 2009, p.1). Yet this opening is soon destabilized by the protagonist's journey to Kenya, which triggers a temporal and spatial shift into a postcolonial African context laden with its own violence and injustice. The temporal movement across continents allows Mukoma to juxtapose the legacies of the Rwandan genocide with the racialized violence in the U.S., portraying the Kenyan state as a post-conflict society grappling with unhealed wounds.

As literary scholar Mwangi (2014) argues, African crime fiction often uses time not merely as chronology, but as "palimpsest" where the present is written over but never erases the violent past. This is evident in Ishmael's encounters in Nairobi, where the case opens doors to historical traumas such as the genocide survivors in Mathare that continually resurface and shape the postcolonial present. These interruptions in linear time dramatize how the Kenyan state is haunted by histories it has failed to confront.

The novel's episodic structure, filled with dreams, flashbacks, digressions, and abrupt tonal shifts, mimics the disorientation of postcolonial temporality. Ishmael's dream sequences, such as the erotic and grotesque vision involving Mo, blur the lines between past and present, real and imagined. According to Njogu (2021), this strategy reflects "the psychic fragmentation of the postcolonial subject who must navigate competing temporalities: personal memory, national history, and global modernity."

The detective genre typically thrives on causality and closure, but Mukoma subverts this by delaying resolution and emphasizing ambivalence. The unsolved nature of certain crimes and the complicity of powerful transnational actors—such as Lord Thomson and Samuel Alexander—suggest that justice in the Kenyan state is structurally deferred, postponed by layers of bureaucracy, global interference, and historical erasure.

Moreover, the detective's temporal dislocation mirrors the condition of the diaspora. Ishmael, as a Black American tracing roots in Kenya, confronts the temporal contradictions of being both insider and outsider, his American past constantly reframing his Kenyan present. As Mukoma's own scholarly work notes, the diasporic subject exists in "a temporal fracture between mythologized roots and lived realities" (Mukoma wa Ngugi, 2012).

In sum, *Nairobi Heat* uses temporal fragmentation not only to advance the detective narrative but also to critique the postcolonial state's failure to reckon with its history. The Kenyan nation is depicted as existing in "in-between time": after formal independence but before the realization of justice. This in-betweenness, amplified by shifts between American and African spaces, illustrates how time is not a neutral backdrop but a contested terrain in the struggle for identity, memory, and justice.

Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players* (2015) employs a nonlinear temporal structure as a strategic technique to narrate the fractured, elusive, and often corrupt nature of the postcolonial Kenyan nation. The novel's structure oscillates between personal memory, real-time events, and historical retrospection, revealing the entangled relationship between individual lives and state institutions. By weaving together multiple

timelines, Kombani subverts linear historiography and instead presents a state that is recursive, haunted by its own past, and resistant to closure.

The novel opens with a violence, Toma is attacked by the men in a Mercedes Benz and this sets in motion a chain of events that foregrounds Toma's plight as a small piece in a board game. However, rather than proceeding with a linear detective narrative, Kombani intersperses the story with flashbacks into the lives of the protagonist when Toma presents us with his life as a Mutura seller and the meetup with Aria which explains him being targeted by the men under Mr. Walaki's instructions. These temporal shifts expose the socio-economic roots of the characters' present actions and reveal the deeply structural nature of injustice. By constantly pulling the reader into the past, the novel suggests that the present Kenyan state cannot be understood without confronting its unresolved histories of class inequality, corruption, and neoliberal betrayal.

This recursive temporality mirrors what Njogu (2021) terms "narratives of crisis and temporality," where the postcolonial state is portrayed not as a coherent progression toward development but as a repetitive loop of systemic dysfunction. In *Of Pawns and Players*, the past is not merely background; it actively intervenes in the present, with characters haunted by previous betrayals, broken promises, and institutional failures.

The novel's episodic and shifting chronology also disrupts the illusion of state transparency and accountability. As Mwangi (2009) notes, contemporary Kenyan fiction often deploys fragmented narratives to reflect the opaque operations of power. In *Of Pawns and Players*, time becomes a metaphor for how the state conceals, delays, and distorts truth. The stalled court cases, rigged casino games, and manipulated media cycles

all reflect a temporality where justice is deferred, and the public is perpetually caught in a state of waiting.

Furthermore, the novel's use of flashforwards, where the outcomes of certain actions are revealed before the events leading to them, destabilizes narrative certainty and reflects the unpredictability of life under a predatory state. This technique undermines reader expectations, echoing the lived reality of citizens who are aware of state corruption but powerless to predict or prevent its outcomes. Kombani thus uses time not just as a storytelling tool but as a political critique of a state that operates through unpredictability and selective memory.

The personal timelines of characters in the novel are tightly interwoven with national history, particularly in moments when state violence or economic collapse impacts private lives. Mukoma wa Ngugi (2018) argues that postcolonial African fiction must grapple with the legacies of violence and neoliberalism that continue to shape subjectivities. In *Of Pawns and Players*, Kombani embodies this imperative by showing how state neglect and systemic inequality are not abstract policies but lived realities. The novel's temporal disjunctions underscore how ordinary people become pawns in elite political games, with their fates determined by decisions made in distant boardrooms or shady backrooms.

Ultimately, Kombani's use of a nonlinear temporal structure is not merely a stylistic choice but a critical lens through which to expose the fractured legitimacy of the Kenyan state. Time in *Of Pawns and Players* is not a neutral backdrop but a contested terrain, shaped by memory, trauma, and institutional decay. By refusing linearity, the novel resists the state's narrative of orderly governance and progress, revealing instead a system of

cyclical exploitation and deferred justice. In doing so, Kombani aligns with a broader tradition in Kenyan literature that uses temporality as both a narrative strategy and a political critique.

4.5 Binary oppositions

Binary oppositions are a foundational narrative technique that authors use to structure meaning, particularly in postcolonial literature. Structuralist and poststructuralist theories have long emphasized the role of binary pairs such as black/white, good/evil, and self/other in shaping the architecture of narrative. According to Barry (2017), these oppositions are not merely thematic concerns but constitute a basic structural mechanism through which meaning is produced in texts.

Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* (2009) is a crime novel that doubles as a postcolonial meditation on race, justice, and belonging. Central to its structure and thematic exploration is the pervasive use of binary oppositions. These binaries are not merely stylistic but ideologically charged, revealing deeper anxieties about identity, morality, and global power relations. The protagonist, Ishmael, a Black American detective, becomes a liminal figure navigating and contesting these oppositions, destabilizing received categories of race, justice, and cultural belonging.

Binary oppositions are a foundational narrative technique that authors use to structure meaning, particularly in postcolonial literature. Structuralist and poststructuralist theories have long emphasized the role of binary pairs, such as black/white, good/evil, and self/other, in shaping the architecture of narrative. According to Barry (2017), these oppositions are not merely thematic concerns but constitute a basic structural mechanism through which meaning is produced in texts. In the case of *Nairobi Heat*, binaries such as

black/white or global/local do not simply reflect ideological tensions, but extend to organising the narrative and shape the reader's engagement with the story's postcolonial dimensions.

This use of binary oppositions as a technique of narration is further supported by Culler (2007), who argues that narrative structures frequently rely on oppositional logic to generate interpretive tension and to mediate complex social realities. In postcolonial fiction, such oppositions are often exposed as unstable or problematic, serving a dual role: structuring the story while also being subject to critique. Eagleton (2008) reinforces this view by showing how binaries construct ideological frameworks that authors then interrogate, particularly in texts that address the legacies of colonialism and contested identity.

From a narratological perspective, Hawthorn (2018) and Rimmon-Kenan (2002) both highlight binary oppositions as central to the organization of plot and character. Hawthorn notes that binaries help to frame conflict and resolution, functioning as tools through which narratives are shaped and made coherent. Rimmon-Kenan similarly argues that binary structures are integral to narrative logic and guide the reader's moral and psychological alignment with characters. In *Nairobi Heat*, Mukoma applies this structural logic while simultaneously subverting it to reflect the hybrid and fractured realities of postcolonial identity.

The use of binary oppositions as a narrative and ideological device extends beyond *Nairobi Heat*, forming a foundational concept in both literary criticism and cultural theory. Structuralist theorist Lévi-Strauss (1963) proposed that human cultures understand the world through oppositions such as nature/culture, male/female, and

life/death. However, poststructuralist critics like Derrida (1976) challenge this binary thinking. Derrida's concept of *différance* reveals how these oppositions are not equal and often involve hierarchies (e.g., white over black, male over female). He argues that meaning is always deferred and that binaries are unstable, subject to reversal and disruption. Mukoma's *Nairobi Heat* echoes this poststructuralist skepticism by foregrounding and then destabilizing such oppositions.

This destabilization is not unique to Mukoma. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) stages binaries such as tradition/modernity and indigenous/colonial to show how colonial disruption unravels Igbo cosmology. Achebe critiques rigid identities, much like Mukoma critiques inherited racial and cultural categories. Similarly, Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) deconstructs binaries like past/present and love/violence, showing how historical trauma resists moral categorization. In Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), binaries such as white/Black and power/subjugation collapse in the moral and political ambiguity of post-apartheid South Africa creating a parallel with Ishmael's own destabilization.

In theoretical terms, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) critiques the binary of East/West, arguing that the "Orient" is constructed as the irrational inverse of the civilized West. Mukoma mirrors this critique through the American detective's encounter with Nairobi, initially filtered through Western mythologies but ultimately revealed as a complex and dynamic space. Bhabha (1994), in turn, disrupts binary logic altogether through his notion of hybridity. Ishmael, mistaken for a white foreigner (*mzungu*), embodies the in-between space where cultural identity becomes fluid and performative. As Bhabha argues, identities emerge in ambivalence and mimicry, never in fixed forms.

Mukoma's narrative opens with the line: "A beautiful young blonde was dead, and the suspect, my suspect, was an African male" (Ngugi, 2009, p. 1). This racially loaded binary white woman vs Black man evokes colonial and American anxieties about racial purity and criminality. Yet Ishmael's dual identity disrupts the binary; he is both subject to and complicit in the Western gaze.

The investigation is framed in moral binaries: "What I found there would either condemn or save him" (Ngugi, 2009, p. 2). Africa becomes a crucible for moral reckoning, complicating Ishmael's sense of justice. The novel also renders whiteness and blackness in both racial and spatial terms. On the plane, Ishmael is surrounded by the "whiteness" of the passengers, crew, and wealth, whereas Nairobi greets him with "blackness": heat, noise, and a sensory excess (Ngugi, 2009, pp. 2–3). This evokes his internal dissonance and his symbolic return to an ancestral space that resists easy resolution.

When Ishmael sees Nairobi as an "island of lights engulfed by perfect darkness" (Ngugi, 2009, p. 3), it recalls colonial tropes of African wilderness threatening civilization. Meanwhile, his American badge and gun symbolize global power. Yet, local encounters, from the cab driver's ironic "mzungu" to the CID officer's colonial jokes, reveal the novel's critique of neocolonial authority and the slipperiness of racial perception (Ngugi, 2009, p. 4).

The novel's title, *Nairobi Heat*, underscores climatic and symbolic binaries. The heat becomes a metaphor for moral confrontation, contrasting with American cool detachment. Even the murder, featuring a white female victim and a Black male suspect, echoes racial myths, which Mukoma critiques by reorienting the detective's gaze and complicating reader expectations.

Nairobi Heat mobilizes binary oppositions to expose and critique ideological constructs underpinning race, justice, and power. Through Ishmael's transnational journey, Mukoma interrogates the limitations of binary thinking in a postcolonial world. Rather than resolving these tensions, the novel leaves them open, unstable, and morally complex. As a narrative technique, the use and disruption of binaries situates *Nairobi Heat* firmly within a tradition of third-generation African writing that uses form to interrogate the Kenyan state and global structures of inequality (Tyson, 2015). Ultimately, Mukoma's novel affirms that the postcolonial condition is not one of clarity but of multiplicity, flux, and contradiction.

In *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019), Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor constructs a richly symbolic narrative that hinges on a series of binary oppositions which entail conflicts and contrasts that structure meaning, character identity, and the moral geography of the Kenyan nation. From sea versus land, tradition versus modernity, faith versus doubt, and home versus exile, Owuor uses these opposites not simply to dramatize conflict but to question the fixity of such binaries.

As Lévi-Strauss (1963) argues, human thought organizes the world through oppositions such nature/culture, male/female, sacred/profane, and narrative becomes a way of mediating or resolving them. Owuor's novel takes this structuralist insight further: by blurring or destabilizing opposites, she transforms *The Dragonfly Sea* into a postcolonial reflection on identity, belonging, and the fractured nature of the modern Kenyan state.

The most pervasive opposition in *The Dragonfly Sea* is that between sea and land. The sea represents fluidity, migration, and ancestral memory, while land symbolizes fixedness, bureaucracy, and the control of the state. Ayaana, the protagonist, feels

spiritually called by the sea, which functions as a metaphor for both her inner freedom and the transnational hybridity of coastal identity.

When she looks toward the horizon, she imagines connection to ancient Chinese sailors, to her lost father, and to the spiritual world beneath the waves. In contrast, life on land, especially under Kenyan bureaucratic structures, feels restrictive and monitored. This opposition dramatizes the tension between cosmopolitan openness and national confinement, between the oceanic imagination and the bureaucratic nation-state.

In narratological terms, this is a diegetic opposition that structures the novel's setting and tone: the lyrical passages describing the sea are poetic and expansive, while those depicting state offices and inland spaces adopt a formal, often ironic tone (Genette, 1980). The sea thus becomes a *symbolic discourse of freedom* (Bakhtin, 1981), while land embodies the rigidity of state ideology.

Another major binary in the novel is tradition versus modernity. Owuor portrays Pate Island as a repository of deep Swahili, Arab, and African histories, rituals, Sufi spirituality, and ancestral continuity. This cultural matrix collides with the forces of modernization, represented by global trade, digital technology, and the influence of the Chinese state.

The arrival of Chinese delegations seeking to "reconnect ancient ties" illustrates the ambivalence of modernization: it is both an opportunity for mobility and a vehicle for new dependency. Owuor's satire of the language of "development" underscores how modernization often reproduces colonial asymmetries.

Through Ayaana's journey to China, Owuor stages this binary as a rite of passage, a narrative structure identified by Bal (1997) as a *transformation sequence*, where the protagonist must negotiate conflicting systems of value. Tradition and modernity are not opposites to be reconciled but *coexistent forces* shaping Kenya's evolving identity. The novel's narrative form, oscillating between mythic and contemporary registers, mirrors this hybrid temporality.

Gender constitutes another crucial opposition in *The Dragonfly Sea*: male authority versus female agency. In Pate society, patriarchal norms persist under both religious and secular guises. Yet Owuor's women, particularly Munira and Ayaana, embody resilience, knowledge, and spiritual intuition.

Munira's defiance of social expectations and Ayaana's oceanic calling invert patriarchal hierarchies. Their relationship reveals the tension between maternal protection and filial autonomy, an emotional binary that drives the novel's narrative progression. The sea, often gendered as feminine, becomes a metaphorical mother, both nurturing and dangerous, challenging the masculine order of governance, science, and rationality.

As Bakhtin (1981) might argue, the feminine voice in the novel introduces carnivalesque subversion, a reversal of dominant hierarchies through laughter, irony, and storytelling. Owuor's narrative style, rich in poetic excess, resists the linear, rational language of male-centered authority, thus renarrating the Kenyan state from a gendered, affective perspective.

A subtler binary runs through the spiritual dimension of *The Dragonfly Sea*: faith versus doubt, or divine order versus existential uncertainty. Owuor's coastal world is steeped in

Islamic, African, and Christian cosmologies, yet none offers absolute answers. Ayaana's visions, dreams, and mystical encounters complicate the secular logic of the state and the pragmatic rationality of modern education.

The novel's narrative voice embraces this ambiguity. Owuor's syntax, dense with allusions and metaphors, mirrors what Genette (1980) calls *variations in narrative mood*, a stylistic modulation that evokes both spiritual transcendence and psychological fragmentation. The oscillation between belief and skepticism parallels the Kenyan nation's moral uncertainty, torn between imported religious systems and ancestral memory.

Through this binary, Owuor reimagines spirituality not as dogma but as narrative multiplicity, a polyphonic dialogue of voices seeking meaning amid disillusionment.

Ayaana's journey to China introduces the binary of home versus exile, dramatizing the contradictions of globalization. While the sea connects Kenya to the wider world, migration also brings alienation. The Kenyan state's complicity in Ayaana's displacement by sending her abroad under the guise of "exchange"reflects the neocolonial condition where mobility becomes another form of control.

This opposition is narratively enacted through focalization shifts: the Kenyan chapters are lyrical and rooted, while the Chinese episodes are marked by disorientation and surveillance. Bal (1997) describes such shifts as *semantic oppositions encoded in narrative form*.

In China, Ayaana's foreignness exposes the illusion of global belonging. She is both celebrated and objectified, embodying the postcolonial subject caught between

cosmopolitan promise and existential exile. The binary is never resolved, suggesting that belonging itself is fluid, and an ongoing negotiation rather than a fixed identity.

Owuor's novel also articulates a political binary: the Kenyan state versus the citizen. Bureaucratic language, filled with euphemisms of progress and development, is juxtaposed with the poetic and affective language of the marginalized. The state is depicted as impersonal, mechanical, and morally vacuous, while ordinary citizens embody memory, loss, and endurance.

This structural opposition mirrors what Fairclough (1995) identifies as linguistic asymmetry which is the power of institutional discourse to define and silence subaltern voices. However, through narrative irony and stylistic hybridity, Owuor reverses this dynamic: the poetic voice of the sea and the people undermines the official voice of the state.

Thus, the novel's narrative discourse (Genette, 1980) itself becomes a site of resistance. The state's monologic language is countered by the novel's polyphony, transforming binary opposition into political critique.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, Owuor constructs binary oppositions only to dissolve them. Sea and land, tradition and modernity, home and exile, male and female, each opposition is ultimately destabilized, showing that identity, culture, and nationhood in postcolonial Kenya are defined by flux and hybridity rather than rigid boundaries.

From a narratological perspective, Owuor's manipulation of focalization, tone, and language mirrors this thematic fluidity. Her narrative becomes a *palimpsest of opposites*, where meaning arises from the tensions between binaries rather than their resolution.

Ultimately, Owuor's novel transforms structural oppositions into a poetics of transformation, reimagining the Kenyan state not as a static totality but as a dynamic, ever-renewing process of negotiation between memory and modernity.

The narrative presents a vivid portrayal of urban Kenyan life through the experiences of Thomas (Toma), a street vendor whose chance encounter with a wealthy woman, Aria, exposes deep social and ideological contrasts. These contrasts are structured through binary oppositions, a key concept in structuralist literary theory developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss and later applied to literature by critics such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida.

At the heart of the narrative lies a clear opposition between the rich and the poor. Thomas, a humble *mutura* seller, represents the urban working poor, while Aria and her father, associated with Mercedes Benz cars, large homes, and private security, embody affluence and privilege. The contrast is dramatized in the opening scene where a man from a Mercedes-Benz assaults Thomas, a metaphorical and literal expression of class violence. The violence reinforces what Bourdieu (1984) calls *symbolic domination*, where social hierarchy is maintained through both material and cultural power.

Thomas's world of "mud-filled ditches" and "dust-covered mutura coils" stands in stark contrast to Aria's world of "ornately furnished rooms" and "large compounds" guarded by "Alsatians and Dobermans." These details illustrate the binary spatial structure of the city: the ghetto versus the gated estate. The narrator's ironic comment that *Kiamatawa means 'city of lights' but has few working street lights* exposes the illusion of development and modernity - a common motif in postcolonial urban literature (Ogude, 1999).

Another significant opposition lies in the urban-rural divide. Thomas's recollection of picking pyrethrum flowers before escaping to the city evokes the rural past defined by exploitation and hard labour. The city, though harsh, represents opportunity and self-definition. This mirrors the rural-urban migration trope common in East African fiction, where characters like Ole Kulet's protagonists or Grace Ogot's villagers move between worlds of tradition and modernity (Amateshe, 1991).

However, the city's promises are deceptive. While Thomas finds economic survival through *mutura* vending, he also faces corruption ("something small" for the *kanjo*), insecurity, and humiliation. Thus, the city-rural binary becomes not merely spatial but moral: rural simplicity and community vs. urban corruption and alienation (Ogot, 1968).

The text also destabilizes traditional gender binaries. While Thomas initially appears as the stereotypical streetwise man, his vulnerability - physical, emotional, and economic - challenges hegemonic masculinity. The moment he recalls being beaten by a girl in school becomes symbolic: male pride is continuously punctured in the narrative. This reversal aligns with poststructuralist readings that view binaries as unstable and subject to reversal (Derrida, 1978).

Similarly, Aria's agency and control, she approaches, buys, and negotiates, contrasts with Thomas's hesitant masculinity. Their relationship thus dramatizes the intersection of gender and class, where power operates not only through money but also through voice, confidence, and spatial mobility.

Another binary that structures the narrative is truth vs. deceit. When Aria's father accuses Thomas of being an "impostor," the story interrogates the moral economy of social

mobility. Thomas's false identification as a "commodities dealer" ironically reflects a society where appearances define worth. In this sense, the imposture exposes a larger hypocrisy in Kenya's class structure, the moral corruption of the elite who accuse the poor of fraud while living off systemic dishonesty (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986).

This tension between authenticity and performance also parallels the binary between local knowledge and global aspiration, Thomas's humble craft of *mutura* versus Aria's cosmopolitan sophistication ("American twang," "white umbrella," "expensive-looking phone"). Their worlds intersect but do not integrate, suggesting that the binaries of class and culture remain intact.

Finally, the story constantly negotiates between order and chaos, law-abiding citizenship and arbitrary violence. Thomas identifies himself as a "law-abiding citizen who pays taxes," yet he is assaulted and abducted without cause. This paradox mirrors what Mbembe (2001) calls *the postcolony's state of exception*, where legality and violence coexist. The *kanjo* police, for instance, represent the blurred line between authority and criminality.

Through these binary oppositions such as wealth/poverty, urban/rural, masculinity/vulnerability, truth/deceit, and order/chaos, the story critiques Kenya's urban social stratification and moral contradictions. Each opposition is not absolute but fluid, producing irony and social insight. Ultimately, the narrative exposes how these binaries shape, constrain, and define human relationships within the postcolonial city.

4.6 Satirical and Politically Loaded language: Doublespeak and the Kenyan Nation

"Politicians are masters of double speak." This line from *Nairobi Heat* summarises the biting cynicism of Mukoma wa Ngugi's narrator, Ismael, who exposes how official language operates as a mask for power. The phrase *doublespeak*, drawn from Orwellian discourse, critiques the manipulation of language by those in authority to obscure truth and evade accountability (Orwell, 1949). In *Nairobi Heat*, this critique is transplanted into a postcolonial and transnational frame, where language becomes a tool not of transparent governance but of elite preservation. This mirrors broader rhetorical patterns in postcolonial Kenya, where politicians often employ vague, morally ambiguous language such as "national unity" or "development" to appeal to multiple audiences without committing to substantive reform (Mbeke, 2008; Mbembe, 2001). Such language allows leaders to perform populist or reformist identities while maintaining their grip on power, a tactic especially visible during election seasons or national crises (Cheeseman, Lynch, & Willis, 2016).

During the detectives' visit to Mathare slums, O buys maize on the cob that Ismael does not know how to eat so the boys selling the maize offer to show him how it is done. After removing a few grains from the kernel, the boy throws a few into his mouth and tells him that "that is tax". The boy's playful taxation critiques the failed social contract in Kenya, especially in underdeveloped urban peripheries. In areas like Mathare, residents pay taxes (formally and informally), but basic services such as clean water, sanitation, roads, and healthcare are absent. The joke becomes a satirical inversion, in the senses that here, it is the marginalized - the young boys - who impose tax, not the state.

This reversal reflects the absurdity of a state that takes but does not give, and it mirrors the way third-generation writers like Mukoma wa Ngugi expose contradictions in postcolonial governance. The moment also illustrates what Ferguson (2006) calls the "shadow state" which is a network of informal relations and appropriations that replaces formal governance structures.

Mukoma's satire aligns with a wider African literary tradition that uses irony to unmask the absurdities of state power (Ogude, 2011). Indeed, as Branch (2011) observes, this strategic linguistic ambiguity is rooted in Kenya's post-independence history, where nationalist rhetoric was used to legitimize authoritarian rule and suppress dissent. Through this lens, *Nairobi Heat* becomes a sharp commentary on how doublespeak, both in Kenya and its diasporic echoes, functions as a discursive strategy to sustain political hegemony and neutralize democratic demands.

In *Of Pawns and Players* (2017), Kinyanjui Kombani re-narrates the Kenyan state through a satirical depiction of everyday life in the informal economy. By employing a narrator who oscillates between humour and despair, Kombani transforms the *mutura* vendor's voice into a site of ideological contestation, where the contradictions of the postcolonial nation are exposed through the seemingly banal. The novel's opening scene, where Thomas (Toma) is violently slapped by a man stepping out of a Mercedes Benz, dramatizes the arbitrariness of state power and the absurdity of social hierarchies in urban Kenya. Through a blend of irony, comic diction, and symbolic imagery, Kombani's satire becomes a form of narrative resistance that reclaims subaltern speech as a vehicle for political critique.

From a narratological standpoint, Toma functions as a homodiegetic narrator whose limited perspective shapes the reader's perception of the state's moral order. As Genette (1980) observes, the narrator's level of participation in the story world determines how knowledge and authority are distributed across the narrative. Toma's first-person voice, marked by naivety and self-deprecating humour, generates *dramatic irony*: the reader recognizes the systemic violence and corruption that Toma himself misreads as personal misfortune. This *restricted focalization* (Genette, 1980) becomes a satirical device: by allowing the marginalized narrator to recount his own humiliation, Kombani exposes how structural violence operates through normalized everyday interactions.

Bal's (2009) notion of *focalization* further illuminates how Toma's voice mediates the reader's access to power. His perception of the world, filtered through street vernacular and bureaucratic parody, turns language itself into a political battlefield. When Toma insists that he is "a law-abiding citizen who pays his taxes" because he sees *VAT* on supermarket receipts, Kombani mimics bureaucratic speech only to hollow it out. The effect is what Bakhtin (1981) would term *double-voiced discourse*: official language is appropriated and ironized within the carnivalesque speech of the underclass. This interplay between *the serious* and *the comic*, between *state discourse* and *street idiom*, generates a dialogic structure that embodies the heteroglossia of the postcolonial city.

Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia*, the coexistence of multiple speech genres within the novel, helps explain how Kombani's narrative resists monologic state narratives. The voices of politicians, police officers, and street vendors intersect in a cacophony that mirrors Kenya's fractured moral order. The comic miscommunications, the hybridization of English and Kiswahili, and the playful reinterpretation of bureaucratic terms all

contribute to what Bakhtin (1984) describes as *carnival laughter*: a subversive mode that "degrades" official authority by bringing it into contact with the body, the marketplace, and the grotesque. In Toma's mutura stand, the nation's political absurdities are reenacted on a miniature stage, turning street life into a metaphor for the state itself.

Satire, therefore, operates as a mode of *moral historiography*, a means of rewriting the story of the nation from below. As Ogude (1999) and Gikandi (2000) argue, African satire has long functioned as an aesthetic strategy to critique the failures of the postcolonial state. Kombani's humor, like that of Wahome Mutahi and Meja Mwangi, transforms laughter into political insight. The slap that opens the novel ("Smack!") is both physical and symbolic: it encapsulates the violence of authority and the dispossession of citizenship. Through humor, Toma narrates his pain without bitterness, converting suffering into an act of testimony.

In narratological terms, Kombani's use of temporal distortion, beginning the story *in medias res* ("I probably should have started by telling you about myself"), creates a sense of dislocation that mirrors the instability of the Kenyan state. This non-linear structure, what Genette (1980) would call *anachrony*, blurs the boundary between memory and immediacy, placing the reader in the chaotic temporal order of the marginalized subject. As Thomas recounts his ordeal retrospectively, his narrative becomes both confession and critique, revealing how private trauma and public disorder intersect.

Ultimately, *Of Pawns and Players* exemplifies how the Kenyan novel reclaims narrative space to articulate the subaltern's experience of the nation. The humor, irony, and linguistic hybridity that define Kombani's style constitute not mere entertainment but a

deeply political aesthetics, a "counter-discourse" that contests the monologic story of modernity. In this sense, Kombani's fiction participates in what Bakhtin (1981) calls the *dialogic imagination*: a vision of narrative as a site of ongoing struggle between competing voices, ideologies, and worldviews.

In *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019), Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor constructs a deeply layered linguistic world where satire and doublespeak reveal the fractures within Kenya's political and social consciousness. Her prose, at once lyrical and ironic, dramatizes the contradictions of a postcolonial nation still negotiating the legacies of colonial rule, corruption, and bureaucratic absurdity. Through a narratological reading informed by Bakhtin's (1981) concept of *dialogism* and Genette's (1980) theories of narrative voice and focalization, the novel emerges as a site where language becomes both a weapon of critique and a mirror reflecting Kenya's moral decay. Owuor's politically loaded language—marked by irony, parody, and strategic euphemism—constitutes a form of doublespeak that exposes how the state manipulates discourse to disguise exploitation and legitimize inequality, even as the author's own narration undercuts such rhetoric with biting satire.

Owuor's deployment of doublespeak is most apparent in her portrayal of bureaucratic and political discourse, where government officials speak in inflated, self-congratulatory registers that parody Kenya's developmentalist narrative. Her use of technocratic jargon, phrases such as "strategic partnership," "economic diplomacy," or "national security collaboration", reflects what Orwell (1946) famously termed *political language designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable*. These euphemisms create a moral distance between language and action, masking systemic failures and corruption beneath

the veneer of modern governance. For instance, when Owuor describes politicians invoking "vision" and "progress" while communities remain neglected, she exposes the hollowness of such speech. This is the linguistic terrain of doublespeak, where official rhetoric is detached from lived reality. As Fairclough (1995) argues, such institutional discourse functions ideologically to "reproduce social power and domination" (p. 14). Through narrative irony and exaggerated mimicry of bureaucratic tone, Owuor satirically unveils the absurdity of Kenya's postcolonial elite, whose language reflects both colonial mimicry and moral bankruptcy.

In contrast, Owuor's narrative voice operates through what Genette (1980) calls *variable focalization*, shifting between the detached irony of an observer and the intimate voice of communal experience. This alternation allows her to dramatize the dissonance between official state narratives and the lived realities of coastal communities like Pate Island. The irony deepens when the omniscient narrator mirrors the cadence of political speeches only to subvert them with sensory detail or human vulnerability. For example, when government officials visit the island promising development, Owuor juxtaposes their lofty rhetoric with images of decaying infrastructure and the sea's restless indifference. The juxtaposition serves as a satirical narrative device: while the state's doublespeak promises progress, the material environment testifies to abandonment. This stylistic tension enacts what Bakhtin (1981) calls *polyphony,* the coexistence of multiple, conflicting voices within a single text, through which Owuor allows the reader to perceive both the seduction and the deception inherent in political speech.

The motif of doublespeak also extends to the novel's portrayal of Kenya's engagement with global powers, especially China. Through the language of "mutual cooperation" and

"infrastructure revolution," Owuor alludes to Kenya's contemporary geopolitical entanglements, invoking a satire that transcends national borders. The state's adoption of global capitalist rhetoric reflects a continuation of dependency under the guise of partnership. Owuor's irony is subtle yet incisive: in the same way colonial administrators once justified their presence through a "civilizing mission," modern leaders justify foreign control through the discourse of "development." The narrator's tone often slips into parody when reproducing these expressions, transforming policy language into moral absurdity. As Bhabha (1994) observes, the colonial and postcolonial subject are trapped in *mimicry* whereby there is a repetition of the colonizer's language that is "almost the same, but not quite" (p. 86). Owuor's satire exposes how Kenya's ruling class performs this mimicry, adopting the idioms of globalization while perpetuating internal oppression.

At the same time, Owuor infuses her satire with poetic tenderness and human empathy, preventing it from devolving into pure cynicism. Her irony is restorative rather than merely derisive; it seeks to awaken moral consciousness. Through Ayaana's eyes, the reader perceives the absurdities of the adult world, politicians who speak in riddles of patriotism, journalists who sensationalize suffering, and religious leaders who commodify salvation. Yet, Ayaana's lyrical and intuitive perception contrasts sharply with the bureaucratic doublespeak surrounding her, symbolizing an alternative linguistic ethics rooted in honesty and imagination. Here, language becomes both the site of alienation and the means of redemption. Owuor's use of figurative, sensuous diction transforms ordinary experience into spiritual reflection, suggesting that poetry itself is an act of political resistance. As Bal (1997) notes, narrative form and linguistic style can function as ideological critique by unsettling dominant modes of perception. In this sense,

Owuor's poetic narration dismantles the rationalized idioms of political discourse, revealing their emptiness.

Furthermore, Owuor's satire extends beyond political language to encompass the media and the public sphere, which she portrays as complicit in reproducing doublespeak. The language of news reports, slogans, and advertisements echoes the state's performative optimism while concealing structural violence. The repetition of bureaucratic clichés such as "service delivery," "national unity," "peace and security", evokes what Bakhtin (1981) calls *speech genres of authority*, which demand assent rather than dialogue. Owuor's narrator subtly mocks this linguistic monotony by contrasting it with the polyphonic vitality of everyday speech on Pate Island, where humour, metaphor, and orature maintain social cohesion. In doing so, the novel constructs a binary between the sterile language of power and the regenerative language of the people, a contrast that underscores the moral bankruptcy of the political class and the creative resilience of the marginalized.

Ultimately, *The Dragonfly Sea* presents language as both a symptom and a critique of Kenya's fractured nationhood. Owuor's use of doublespeak mirrors the moral evasions of the postcolonial state, while her satire exposes the distance between political rhetoric and human reality. By layering voices, bureaucratic, poetic, ironic, and communal, she constructs a narratological space where meaning is constantly contested and renegotiated. Her satire is not merely humorous but profoundly ethical, inviting readers to listen critically to the nation's self-narration. In this sense, Owuor's politically loaded language functions as what Bakhtin (1981) terms a *carnivalesque inversion* of power: the laughter, irony, and parody of her prose destabilize official hierarchies and open up possibilities for truth-telling. Through the interplay of doublespeak and satire, *The Dragonfly Sea* re-

narrates the Kenyan state as a moral landscape in search of linguistic and ethical coherence.

4.7 Language loaded in Stylistic Hybridity and the Global-Local Tension

In Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat*, language operates not merely as a vehicle of storytelling but as a critical tool for constructing the Kenyan state as a fragmented, postcolonial entity marked by deep ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural divides. Through a hybridized, vivid, and sometimes vibrating narrative voice, Mukoma captures the contradictions and ruptures within contemporary Kenyan urban life, especially in third-generation literature, which often explores themes of globalization, urban alienation, and historical trauma.

The language of the passage fuses American colloquialisms ("baby fat," "flagged down," "infomercials") with Kenyan urban realities such as *matatus*, Kiswahili slang, and specific ethnic geographies. The matatu, emblazoned with Tupac's *Dear Mama*, is a synecdoche for the intersection of global hip-hop culture and Kenyan youth expression, illustrating how global and local cultures coexist uneasily in the postcolonial state.

This hybrid narration reflects what Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) describes as the "colonial alienation" of African languages and identities. While English dominates the narrative, it is constantly punctuated by local realities and languages, symbolizing a Kenyan state in linguistic transition, grappling with the legacies of colonial modernity and the pressures of global capitalism.

O's description of Mathare as divided into ethnic enclaves and refugee zones portrays the Kenyan state as ethnically and nationally compartmentalized, echoing the real historical

consequences of colonial and post-independence urban planning. The narrator describes Mathare as “an inverted Tower of Babel that descended into hell,” invoking a Biblical image of failed unity. This metaphor, steeped in religious and mythic language, criticizes the failure of national integration, suggesting that Kenya's statehood is built upon disunity rather than cohesion.

Mukoma’s choice of terms like “sectioned off,” “endless rows of shacks,” and “poles that held up the piece of sackcloth” conveys a state where the most vulnerable populations are unrecognized by official discourses but visible to the narrator’s gaze. Yet, the language used to depict Mathare also carries voyeuristic undertones, echoing Western humanitarian infomercials. This self-aware intertextuality critiques both the Western gaze and internal state neglect, forcing readers to confront how language can both represent and re-inscribe power.

Mukoma’s prose is rich in sensory description for instance when describing Mathare using the words “sex, shit, cheap perfume, bad breath, booze, weed, sickness.” These cumulative olfactory images transcend the sanitized language of development discourse, emphasizing visceral urban suffering. Yet, the narrator confesses that the smell is “not bad,” suggesting an uneasy moral ambivalence, a moment where empathy, guilt, and desensitization collide.

This embodied language is important in third-generation African fiction, where writers like Mukoma aim to destabilize hegemonic representations of African urban spaces as purely sites of victimhood or violence. Instead, he constructs Mathare as complex, marked by hardship but also humour, resilience, and informal knowledge, exemplified by

the maize-roasting boys who engage the narrator in playful linguistic and cultural exchange.

The boy's declaration of "this is tax" humorously reflects a localized and informal interpretation of governance and entitlement. It reveals how state practices are mimicked, reinterpreted, and performed by ordinary citizens, especially children who are growing up in spaces where the formal state is absent or untrustworthy.

Rather than receiving public services or support, slum dwellers encounter the state as an extractive and symbolic force, and they internalize this behaviour into everyday interactions. The boy's "tax" thus mimics state behaviour, taking something without necessarily providing a service in return which aligns with Mbembe's (2001) concept of the postcolonial state as one that operates through arbitrary extraction and informal mechanisms.

The detective's visit to Mathare slums is aimed at finding answers on who killed the blonde girl in the United States. However, despite their efforts, Ismael and O are repeatedly met with silence when asking about Joshua. "Everyone we asked just looked back at us and said they didn't know him." This collective silence underscores the limitations of official inquiry and reflects trauma-induced memory erasure or fear which are consequences of both state violence and displacement. It is also a comment on the failure of language to translate refugee experiences, particularly when institutional language (like that of the Refugee Centre) cannot penetrate lived realities.

As Frantz Fanon (1967) argues, colonial language often fails to represent the subaltern's experience; here, even when the narrator speaks English or has his Kiswahili translated,

communication remains elusive, signalling the fractures between language, memory, and statehood.

Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* uses language not only to tell a story but to critique the very conditions that make certain stories possible or impossible to tell in the Kenyan state. Through a stylistically hybrid, sensory, and fragmented narrative, the text reflects the contradictions of a postcolonial nation marked by ethnic segmentation, economic disparity, and global-local entanglements. Third-generation writers like Mukoma deploy this kind of language to interrogate state failure, transnational complicity, and the uncertain place of identity in modern African cities.

In *The Dragonfly Sea*, language is not merely a vehicle of narration, it is itself a political terrain. The novel opens on Pate Island, a liminal space on Kenya's Swahili Coast that has historically mediated exchanges between Africa, Arabia, and Asia. Owuor's protagonist, Ayaana, inhabits a world where identity, memory, and belonging are linguistically negotiated. The narrator moves fluidly between English narration, Swahili phrases, Arabic invocations, and local idioms, creating a text that embodies Kenya's multilingual condition and the contradictions of nationhood.

As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) observes, "language carries culture, and culture carries… the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves" (p. 16). Owuor's multilingual narrative structure dramatizes this insight. By allowing the Kenyan coastline to "speak" in its layered tongues, *The Dragonfly Sea* reclaims the multiplicity of Kenyan identity silenced by the homogenizing discourse of the state and of English-language education.

Linguistic hybridity in Owuor's novel functions on several interrelated levels. On the lexical hybridity whereby Swahili, Arabic, and local words (e.g., *duka, dhow, baraka, mabinti*) are woven seamlessly into English sentences without italics or translation, asserting the equal dignity of local lexicons. On stylistic hybridity, the narrator alternates between lyrical, poetic English and colloquial speech, producing what Bakhtin (1981) terms "speech diversity." For dialogic hybridity, the characters switch codes in conversation, signalling shifts in intimacy, power, or emotion. Sheng and Swahili emerge as languages of solidarity, while English often indexes institutional or foreign authority.

In narratological terms, the heteroglossic texture of Owuor's prose generates multiple "focalizations" (Bal, 1997) that mirror the multiplicity of Kenyan consciousness. The narrative voice itself is hybrid, oscillating between the omniscient and the spiritual, between the realism of the national present and the lyricism of ancestral memory.

Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia, the coexistence of multiple speech types within a single text, provides a powerful framework for interpreting Owuor's linguistic layering. The novel juxtaposes the bureaucratic voice of the Kenyan state with the mystical, oceanic voice of Pate Island. For instance, government officials use formal English and bureaucratic jargon, while Ayaana's mother, Munira, speaks in a rhythmical, idiomatic Swahili that carries emotional truth and communal memory.

This polyphony of voices dramatizes the contestation between the centripetal forces of the nation-state (standardization, bureaucracy, English hegemony) and the centrifugal forces of the periphery (multilingualism, spirituality, oceanic identity). Through this dialogism, Owuor re-narrates the Kenyan state not as a monolithic entity but as a site of discursive struggle between competing histories and tongues.

As Mbembe (2001) suggests, postcolonial African states are "multiple registers of sovereignty" (p. 33). Owuor's heteroglossic narration enacts this multiplicity at the linguistic level, her sentences perform what the Kenyan polity experiences: the simultaneity of colonial inheritance, global neoliberalism, and indigenous resurgence.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity as the "third space of enunciation" provides another theoretical lens. In *The Dragonfly Sea*, hybridity is not simply the coexistence of languages but the creation of new meanings through their encounter. The hybrid sentence becomes a site of resistance to linguistic colonization. When Owuor writes passages such as, "Ayaana listened to the sea's *adhana*, a call both prayer and memory," she fuses Arabic religious lexicon (*adhana*) with English lyrical syntax, producing what Bhabha calls "the interstitial passage between fixed identifications" (p. 4).

This linguistic in-betweenness redefines Kenyan identity beyond ethnic or national boundaries. The hybrid text mirrors the hybrid citizen, a subject negotiating the spaces between Swahili cosmopolitanism, Africanity, Islam, and the modern state. Thus, Owuor's language performs the re-narration of the Kenyan nation as oceanic rather than territorial, fluid rather than fixed.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective (Fairclough, 1995), *The Dragonfly Sea* exposes how language encodes power relations. English in the novel signifies global capital and state authority: it appears in passports, official correspondence, and university discourse. Swahili and Sheng, by contrast, embody intimacy, resistance, and affective community. When Ayaana travels to China on a state-sponsored cultural program, her struggle with Mandarin becomes a metaphor for the continued subjection of Kenyan identity to external linguistic regimes.

Fairclough's (1995) notion that "discourse is a social practice" applies directly here: Owuor's manipulation of multiple linguistic codes reflects and contests the social hierarchies embedded in Kenya's postcolonial language policy. By juxtaposing registers of officialdom with the speech of ordinary islanders, she critiques the exclusionary nature of state discourse and reclaims narrative authority for the margins.

Linguistic hybridity in *The Dragonfly Sea* also functions as epistemic restitution, a decolonial recovery of erased knowledges. The Swahili coast's long history of Indian Ocean exchange had produced a sophisticated multilingual culture before the advent of colonial borders. Owuor's novel revives this cosmopolitanism by narrating Pate as a space of translation, prayer, and poetic naming. In this sense, linguistic hybridity becomes a political act of remembering through language (Wa Thiong'o, 1993).

Through its multilingual aesthetic, the novel insists that Kenyan identity cannot be contained within a single idiom. The voice of the sea, poetic, elusive, shifting between languages, symbolizes the resilience of cultural memory against the flattening effects of nationalism and globalization.

In narratological terms, Owuor's narrative voice itself embodies hybridity as form. Genette (1980) would describe her narrator as an extradiegetic-homodiegetic hybrid, both outside the story and immersed in its spiritual texture. This fluid narratorial position mirrors the text's linguistic hybridity. The narrator, like Kenya itself, oscillates between being subject and observer, between English cosmopolitanism and Swahili rootedness.

Moreover, temporal shifts, between Ayaana's present, ancestral legends, and prophetic visions, create what Bal (1997) calls "anachronic narration," a refusal of linear

modernity. The result is a narrative temporality that parallels the fluidity of hybrid language: non-linear, recursive, and oceanic.

Through its layered linguistic architecture, *The Dragonfly Sea* reimagines the Kenyan state as a multilingual, multi-temporal formation whose identity is perpetually in translation. Owuor's strategic blending of languages resists the colonial legacy of linguistic hierarchy and affirms the coastal, Indian Ocean heritage as integral to Kenya's national imagination.

In doing so, she extends the project begun by writers like Ngũgĩ and Grace Ogot, using language not only as representation but as reparation. Her linguistic hybridity enacts a decolonial politics of memory, where every borrowed word, untranslated phrase, and musical rhythm becomes a form of narrative sovereignty. Ultimately, Owuor's prose performs the re-narration of the Kenyan state as a polyphonic sea of voices, bound not by rigid borders but by the fluid, living currents of language.

Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players* dramatizes the everyday struggles of Nairobi's informal economy while juxtaposing globalized aspirations against local realities. Through a fusion of vernacular speech, popular idioms, and urban multilingualism, the novel embodies what can be termed *stylistic hybridity,* a mode of narration that reflects both linguistic and ideological plurality. Using Roland Barthes's structuralist narratology and Gerald Prince's concept of narrative discourse, this essay examines how Kombani's linguistic strategies and narrative structures capture the *global-local tension* inherent in postcolonial Kenyan urban life.

Barthes (1977) viewed narrative as "a system of signs" whose meanings derive from the interplay between *signifiers* and *codes* (p. 87). In *Of Pawns and Players*, Kombani's use of localized English and Kiswahili idioms functions as a network of cultural signifiers that encode the social hierarchies of Nairobi's working-class quarters. The protagonist Toma's narration blends English syntax with Kiswahili expressions such as *kanjo* (county police), *mutura* (local sausage), and *esiorori* (visual metaphor for dizziness), creating a linguistic hybridity that mirrors the polyphonic texture of Kenyan urban speech.

Barthes's notion of *readerly* and *writerly* texts is also relevant here. While the surface story—a street vendor's entanglement with the elite, appears *readerly*, inviting immersion in a realist narrative, Kombani's strategic code-switching and ironic self-reflection transform it into a *writerly* text that forces the reader to decode multiple layers of meaning (Barthes, 1974). For instance, when Toma reflects, "Why has the man from the Mercedes Benz hit me in the eye?... I am a good and honest individual trying to make a living in Kiamatawa," the tension between personal innocence and systemic violence becomes a signifier of broader socio-economic inequities.

Prince (1982) posits that narrativity resides not merely in *what* is told but *how* it is told, the relationship between narrator, focalization, and temporal sequencing. Toma's first-person perspective exemplifies an *internal focalization* that aligns the reader with subaltern consciousness while exposing contradictions within the globalized city. His naive yet observant tone frames Nairobi as a site of both aspiration and oppression, revealing what Prince calls the "mimetic illusion" of narrative, the sense of realism that conceals structural artifice (p.19).

The novel's temporal structure reinforces this duality. Toma's narration oscillates between the immediacy of sensory description ("Smack! It catches me by surprise...") and retrospective commentary ("I probably should have started by telling you about myself"). This dual temporality echoes Prince's concept of *anachrony*, where narrative time diverges from story time to generate irony and self-awareness (Prince, 1987). Through these temporal shifts, Kombani dramatizes the dissonance between the street vendor's lived experience and the capitalist temporality of the elite.

The linguistic and structural hybridity of *Of Pawns and Players* underscores the global-local tension at the heart of Kenya's neoliberal order. Toma's encounter with Aria, a cosmopolitan woman who speaks with "an American twang," embodies the infiltration of global consumer culture into local spaces. Her use of Standard English and globalized expressions contrasts sharply with Toma's colloquial idiom, symbolizing what Barthes (1977) calls the "mythification" of modernity where Westernized language becomes a sign of power and legitimacy.

Moreover, the narrative juxtaposes the informal economy of *mutura* vending with the opulence of "the brilliant white Mercedes Benz" and "ornately furnished rooms," producing what Prince (1982) would identify as *narrative duality*: the coexistence of two moral and economic orders within a single diegetic space. The irony of Toma's self-identification as "a law-abiding citizen who pays taxes" despite his marginality exposes the performative nature of citizenship in postcolonial economies, where legality and survival are often in tension.

Kombani's stylistic hybridity, therefore, functions as both aesthetic strategy and ideological critique. By interweaving street vernacular, humour, and Standard English

narration, the author dismantles linguistic hierarchies that privilege the educated elite. The use of oral performance devices such as onomatopoeia ("Smack!"), repetition, and direct address, situates the text within African orature while engaging global literary forms. This hybridity enacts what Barthes (1977) would describe as the *plurality of meaning*, a refusal of closure that resists the monologic discourse of capitalist modernity.

In narratological terms, Prince's (1982) framework reveals how focalization and narrative temporality amplify the social commentary embedded in language. Toma's narrative voice, though seemingly comic, exposes the precariousness of informal urban labour. His oscillation between self-deprecating humor and philosophical reflection exemplifies the tension between the *local self* and the *global gaze*, a linguistic negotiation of identity in postcolonial Nairobi.

Through Barthes's semiotic analysis and Prince's narratological lens, *Of Pawns and Players* emerges as a text of stylistic hybridity that dramatizes the friction between local authenticity and global modernity. Kombani's manipulation of language, his fusion of street idioms with narrative irony, creates a heteroglossic discourse that mirrors Kenya's socio-economic stratifications. The novel's narrative form, voice, and linguistic texture ultimately reveal how global capitalism reshapes local subjectivities while reaffirming the resilience and creativity of subaltern expression.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the techniques of narration employed in *Nairobi Heat, Of Pawns and Players*, and *The Dragonfly Sea* are not merely aesthetic choices but deeply political tools that shape how the Kenyan nation is represented, questioned, and reimagined. Through varied narrative strategies, such as shifts in point of view, the use of

distinct narrative voices, complex temporal structures, and the deployment of binary oppositions, Mukoma wa Ngugi, Kinyanjui Kombani, and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor construct layered critiques of postcolonial governance, national identity, and belonging.

In *Nairobi Heat*, the use of a first-person detective narrator positions the reader within a personal and investigative frame, allowing the narrative to simultaneously question both American and Kenyan systems of justice and power. Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players* employs a realist third-person voice with strategic internal focalization that brings out the socioeconomic disenfranchisement of the urban poor, exposing the state's complicity in systemic exploitation. Meanwhile, Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* embraces a poetic, often non-linear temporal structure and a lyrical narrative voice that navigates memory, heritage, and state violence across multiple geographies, thereby challenging linear nationalist narratives.

Across all three texts, binary opposition, such as tradition vs. modernity, state vs. citizen, and centre versus periphery, are employed only to be destabilized, reflecting the fluid and often contradictory nature of postcolonial Kenyan statehood. The authors resist singular or authoritative accounts, choosing instead to present the nation as a contested, fractured, and affectively charged space.

The chapter underscores that narrative form is inseparable from political content. The chosen techniques of narration enable these third-generation writers to disrupt dominant nation narratives, elevate marginalized voices, and invite the reader into a space of critical reflection. These texts not only narrate the Kenyan nation but also narrate against it, through form, structure, and voice, marking literature as a rich site of resistance and reimagination.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Overview

In this final and fifth chapter, a summary of the findings of the study is done as well as suggestions to further the study are proposed.

5.2 Summary of findings

Based on the preceding discussion, the study reveals that third-generation Kenyan writers, Mukoma wa Ngugi, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and Kinyanjui Kombani, engage deeply with pressing issues in contemporary Kenya, particularly corruption, identity, globalization, terrorism, youth disenfranchisement, and the ethical collapse of nation institutions. *Nairobi Heat* critiques transnational crime and racialized justice systems while linking Kenya's internal politics to global complicities. *The Dragonfly Sea* addresses the impact of maritime geopolitics, spiritual heritage, and postcolonial marginalization, with special focus on coastal Kenya. *Of Pawns and Players* takes on systemic corruption and class struggle, foregrounding the precarity of urban youth and the manipulation of public institutions for private gain.

The language used across the texts reflects both stylistic innovation and political consciousness. Mukoma wa Ngugi employs a hybrid register that blends American noir with Kenyan idioms to expose global-local entanglements. Owuor uses lyrical, elliptical prose that weaves personal memory with collective history, suggesting a meditative engagement with nationhood. Kombani adopts a direct, realist style infused with colloquial speech, which vividly captures the social frustrations of the urban underclass. Across the texts, language becomes a tool for both resistance and reimagination

foregrounding ambiguity, irony, and vernacular strategies to question official narratives and state authority.

In terms of narrative technique, the authors favour multi-layered structures, nonlinear timelines, and focalization through marginalized or liminal figures. Mukoma wa Ngugi employs detective fiction conventions to subvert notions of truth and justice. Owuor's use of fragmentation and poetic digression reflects the disorienting effects of historical violence and identity loss. Kombani constructs a fast-paced, plot-driven narrative anchored in everyday realism to expose the manipulation of national ideals. Together, these narrative strategies destabilize dominant perceptions of the nation, inviting readers to reconsider whose voices, experiences, and memories constitute Kenya's story.

5.3 Conclusion

This study concludes that third-generation Kenyan writers hare deeply invested in interrogating the complexities of the postcolonial Kenyan nation. Through their narratives, Mukoma wa Ngugi, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and Kinyanjui Kombani foreground critical contemporary issues such as corruption, identity crises, systemic violence, marginalization, and the erosion of public trust in institutions. These themes are not treated in isolation but are linked to global forces, historical memory, and the shifting contours of citizenship and belonging in a neoliberal era.

Secondly, the nature of the language used in these texts reflects a deliberate stylistic and ideological departure from earlier literary generations. The authors employ diverse registers, ranging from the lyrical and symbolic to the realist and colloquial, not merely for aesthetic purposes, but as tools to confront and reframe dominant discourses of power and nationhood. Their linguistic choices often resist linearity, clarity, and singular

meaning, favouring instead ambiguity, hybridity, and polyphony as modes of critique and reimagination.

Finally, the narrative techniques used by these writers reveal a strategic engagement with form as a political gesture. Whether through the use of detective fiction tropes, fragmented storytelling, or realist narration, each author crafts a structure that disrupts monologic accounts of the nation. These techniques not only reflect the fractured and contested nature of Kenyan nationhood but also empower alternative voices and ways of knowing. Ultimately, the study concludes that third-generation Kenyan literature plays a vital role in reshaping national consciousness by challenging official narratives and opening up space for plural, situated, and affective engagements with the nation.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the findings from the study of *Nairobi Heat, The Dragonfly Sea, and Of Pawns and Players*, the following three recommendations emerge that can enhance the appreciation, teaching, and development of Kenyan literature in relation to the nation.

In relation to the first objective that focussed on the exploration of issues in contemporary Kenya as portrayed in third-generation fiction, the study recommends the incorporation of third generation Kenyan fiction into secondary and university syllabi. This would aid to better understand how literature reflects Kenya's evolving socio-political landscape. These texts provide critical insight into issues such as corruption, identity crises, marginalization, and globalization. Integrating them into the curriculum would enable students to engage with the nation's contemporary realities through literary imagination, fostering civic awareness and socio-political consciousness.

With regard to the second objective that examined the nature of language used in addressing the Kenyan nation, the study recommends that researchers and teachers of literature should adopt contextual and stylistic approaches that foreground how language functions as a tool of critique and reimagination in third-generation writing. Particular attention should be given to the authors' deployment of linguistic hybridity, ambiguity, irony, and vernacular idioms as strategies for challenging dominant discourses. Such analytical focus will deepen appreciation of the aesthetic and ideological functions of language in shaping national identity and resistance narratives.

In relation to the third objective on the techniques of narration as related to the Kenyan nation, the study recommends that future literary scholarship and pedagogy should emphasize the study of narrative form as a political and ideological gesture. Third-generation writers' use of nonlinear structures, multiple focalizations, and genre blending (detective fiction, lyrical prose, realism) should be explored as modes that contest monolithic representations of the nation. Workshops, conferences, and creative writing programs should therefore encourage experimentation with narrative techniques that foreground multiplicity, fragmentation, and marginalized perspectives as tools for re-narrating Kenyan nationhood.

5.5 Suggestions for further research

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several suggestions for further research can be proposed to extend scholarly engagement with third-generation Kenyan literature and its relationship to the nation. First, a comparative stylistic analysis across literary generations could offer insight into how the language of fiction has evolved in response to shifting political landscapes. Such a diachronic study, examining first-

generation, second-generation, and third-generation Kenyan writers, would reveal whether the stylistic hybridity, narrative fragmentation, and linguistic experimentation observed in contemporary texts mark a break from or continuity with earlier literary traditions.

Secondly, further research could explore the role of gender and sexuality in shaping narrative constructions of the nation. While this study touched on issues of identity and marginalization, a focused examination of how female and queer characters experience and resist state, violence and exclusion would enrich understanding of the intersectional dimensions of nationhood in Kenyan literature.

Thirdly, scholars could investigate how diasporic perspectives within third-generation writing influence portrayals of the Kenyan nation. Both *Nairobi Heat* and *The Dragonfly Sea* engage with transnational identities and geographies, suggesting that future research could fruitfully explore how global movements, exile, and return complicate national belonging and critique state authority.

Finally, there is room for more empirical and reader-oriented studies that examine how audiences interpret and respond to third-generation texts. Understanding how different readerships, that is, students, general readers, or diaspora communities, engage with literary critiques of the nation could provide valuable insights into the social function of literature in Kenya today. These directions would not only deepen literary analysis but also foreground literature's role in shaping civic consciousness and political discourse.

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