



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

Colonial inheritance and postcolonial betrayal: A new historicist reading of decay in Nairobi Noir

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ABSTRACT

The article contends that decay in some short stories from Nairobi Noir, edited by Peter Kimani, is not an incidental or purely individual phenomenon but a traceable outcome of historical events: colonial urbanism, colonial urban planning and the internalisation of colonial power, as well as post-independence governance failures such as state violence and ethnic profiling. Drawing on New Historicism, the article reads 'The Hermit in the Helmet', 'Have Another Roti' and 'She Dug Two Graves' as literature that responds to Nairobi's spatial heritage of colonialism and its political legacy from the post-independence era, before articulating the ways in which 'economic inequality' is dramatised in the anthology's subtexts by 'Say You Are Not My Son' and 'Andaki', and the pathways out of decay that these works collectively imagine.

KEYWORDS: African noir fiction, colonial legacy, decay, governance failure, new historicism, postcolonial Nairobi

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1. Introduction

Founded as a railway colony in 1899, Nairobi was later structured into a scheme of artificial racial and economic segregation in which access to land and infrastructure, and by extension civic dignity, was divided along racial lines. The Kenyan state, inherited at independence, did not break this cycle; the unequal distribution of resources created by colonial rule has continued, and in some instances worsened, in the decades since independence. *Nairobi Noir*, a 2020 book edited by Peter Kimani and published by Akashic Books, collates short stories infused with the legacies of this past: broken systems, ethnicised state violence and an economy centred on informal settlements.

However, this colonial legacy was far from resolved by Nairobi's post-independence trajectory; it was instead reproduced under a new political system. Rapid, largely unplanned population growth, the growth of informal settlements amid well-heeled suburban developments, and the continuity between the city's condition of decay and its colonial legacy have all worked together to create a city that is, more than many might realise, the direct product of colonial history. This article investigates this continuity between colonial causes and postcolonial consequences as a historical object.

This article asks how some stories in this anthology historicise the decay they portray. How do they treat decay not as a passing mood or ambience but as a legible product of recognisable historical and political processes? This article seeks to affirm that decay operates on two distinct registers, the colonial past and the post-independence era, which interact throughout *Nairobi Noir*: the colonial register (as found in 'The Hermit in the Helmet' by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and 'Have Another Roti' by Rasna Warah) and the post-independence register (as found in 'She Dug Two Graves' by Winfred Kiunga, 'Say You Are Not My Son' by Faith Oneya and 'Andaki' by Kinyanjui Kombani). The article also suggests that the anthology does not depict this historical process of decay as unstoppable but points, in select stories, towards individual, collective and cultural responses of resistance. The discussion proceeds by placing this reading in the context of pertinent scholarship, explaining the New Historicist approach, describing the methodology, elaborating the reading across the colonial and post-independence registers, and finally searching for pathways out of decay in the anthology.

2. Literature Review

New Historicism is an approach directly associated with Stephen Greenblatt, who posits that a literary text cannot be taken out of the context of the time and culture in which it was written, and that literature is an active agent of, and not merely a mirror of, cultural and political power. This fits well with the stories in *Nairobi Noir*, which are set in specific historical and geographical circumstances and are not abstracted or rendered through allegory.

This reading draws on a reconstruction of Kenya's post-independence political history. In post-colonial Africa, especially Kenya, every facet of the new state was undermined by the African state inherited from colonial rule: the political system was corrupt, transactions took place outside the law, and corruption was not considered unheard of or extraordinary but a fact of life (Nyongesa). This is complemented by another piece on neo-patrimonialism in Kenyan governance, which shows how personalised and informal networks of power have continually challenged formal institutional accountability (Kimani et al.). The authenticity of Kenya's political history, against which the political corruption, institutional dysfunction and state violence in the stories of *Nairobi Noir* can be read, is documented in these accounts.

The African city has, in fact, been the subject of a broader postcolonial African literary theory in which the paradoxes of modernisation and colonisation, and of dreams of independence and decolonisation, are easily legible. Decay became one of the dominant critical terms for probing this disconnect, a trajectory set in motion by postcolonial writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and *Nairobi Noir* stands firmly in this line. The present inquiry refuses to treat decay as an atmosphere, or as a vague erosion of postcoloniality that could be considered a tradition, and insists instead on locating specific stories in specific, documented histories: colonial spatial planning, the insulation of corrupt governance networks and ethnically targeted state violence.

Existing scholarship has tended to develop the general scholarship first and only then attempt to apply that knowledge to individual stories in the anthology, an area that remains relatively underdeveloped. The thesis of this article is articulated in the context of two historical processes identified as most salient for the

anthology's reading of decay: colonial spatial and psychological inheritance, and post-independence governance failure. The article fills this gap by reading the anthology through these two processes.

3. Theoretical Framework: New Historicism

New Historicism sees texts as artefacts of the past that are in conversation with each other and with other forms of expression emerging from the same historical era: political events, cultural outlook and ideology. On this interpretation, meaning is not a mere product of a text's formal properties but a product of its relationship with its history. The stories of Nairobi Noir are clearly set in the postcolonial city of Nairobi, which highlights the presence of tangible colonial influences and chronic concerns of governance and economic disparity.

A New Historicist reading does more than offer a textual interpretation of decay; it considers the social and political dynamics that created the scenarios for these storyscapes, in which Nairobi's affluent centre and its informal, lower-class communities exist in a zone of conflict and struggle, as some populations have been marginalised by history and as corruption and weak governance have continued from colonial to postcolonial times. As such, the anthology's individual tragedies are not simply personal misfortunes but are woven tightly together with larger socio-political and historical events; this is substantiated with close readings of individual stories in the following sections.

4. Methodology

This article uses qualitative textual and historical contextualisation. Each of the five stories substantially engages with a historical or political process, either as its central subject (colonial cultural inheritance, state violence, ethnic profiling, and economic marginalisation due to colonial and postcolonial policy failure) or as a specific manifestation of it (colonial-era migration or the postcolonial aftermath in 'Have Another Roti', 'She Dug Two Graves', 'Say You Are Not My Son' and 'Andaki'). These stories are read carefully to identify the ways in which they symbolise or narrate these historical events, and are then placed in the context of actual accounts of political events in colonial and post-colonial Kenya. Direct quotation is used sparingly and is cited where the source provides it.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 The Colonial Register: Internalised Power and Cultural Displacement

Among the anthology's most radically confrontational pieces is 'The Hermit in the Helmet'. The main character, Kanage, falls for a colonial-era helmet worn by an Englishman as a symbol of power, assuming that it will give Kanage the same power. Kanage's commitment to the helmet beyond its symbolic context hints at a key, historically verified characteristic of colonialism: its ability to transform the subjectivity of the colonised from within, creating forms of deference and self-alienation that live on even after the colonisers have left. His eventual and narratively problematic acceptance and rejection of the helmet unsettles the potential for decolonisation at the level of individual 'consciousness', but the story does not make the journey to a decolonised consciousness easy or complete.

The story reiterates an implicit lesson that is significant across the anthology: a single gesture of individual will, with all its symbolic power, cannot reverse the decades of colonial rule that have been experienced.

Rasna Warah's 'Have Another Roti' takes a more distinctively colonial historical perspective, following the path of Nairobi's Indian community, which was also formed by the colonial workforce and which tries to balance language, culture and the assimilation of colonial culture in postcolonial Kenya. The characters inhabit an intimate standoff with the people of a community formed in the shadow of the colonial effort in Kenya, and are forced to navigate the myriad pressures of a fast-modernising urban centre that can be reached only by eradicating cultural differences. The decay here has a historical character: the loss of cultural continuity among a minority group, driven by economic pressures, generational shifts and the pressing and ever-present political question, a colonial heritage, of who is truly a 'full' member of the postcolonial country. Together, despite their different concerns, 'The Hermit in the Helmet' and 'Have Another Roti' suggest that the anthology's colonial register is not uniform: the colonised mind's 'psychological residue', as well as the caste constraints and cultural legacy of colonial migration policy, each poised at different locations and times, flowed from the same political stream of stability and instability.

These two stories are placed side by side, historically, because of what their narratives focus on: the decay of two different groups. 'The Hermit in the Helmet' explores the subjective costs of internalised colonial power for a member of the colonised African majority, while 'Have Another Roti' takes up the costs borne by a minority community whose presence in Kenya is itself the result of colonial labour policy, and for whom

postcolonial belonging remains, in the story's own terms, a live and unsettled issue. This pairing reflects a New Historicist concern: that colonial rule, of which Nairobi was a part, brought to the city not one but many differentiated decays, differentiated both in the mechanisms that generated them and in the people who bore them, yet it was always the same city that was the product of these decays. The importance of this differentiation becomes clear when the anthology's overall historical argument is viewed from that perspective: colonialism was not only a general cause of decay but a particular one, which can be traced and was not applied uniformly, with different communities suffering different types of decay and living out its effects in different ways within the same postcolonial city.

5.2 The Post-Independence Register: Governance Failure and State Violence

The colonial register concerns the past of decay, and the post-independence register concerns its cultivation. 'She Dug Two Graves' (Winfred Kiunga) focuses on Fawzia, whose brother Ahmed was killed by the police on suspicion of terrorism, an accusation founded on ethnic profiling and not on any evidence. Reading Ahmed's death in the story, one can see that it is not a standalone incident of bad policing but is indicative of a broader oppression endemic to the political system in which he lived, which is evident in Kenya's post-1952 political history. 'Justice as an Oppressed Subset' identifies the 'entrenched and corrupt' patronage structures of the Kenyan state, which are more fully chronicled by Kimani and associates. Because the injustice depicted in the narrative is not personal but is rooted in structural and historical injustice, its repercussion is Fawzia's relentless quest for revenge; the narrative uses this effect to make the response understandable, even though it presents it as a 'counterproductive course of action' and a price-paid reaction to a change in circumstances that needs to be addressed holistically rather than by individual citizens.

Faith Oneya's 'Say You Are Not My Son' and Kinyanjui Kombani's 'Andaki' move, however, into the sphere of economic governance, an area that is likewise post-independence. The moral compromises exemplified by the story of Nyokabi, the main narrator of Oneya's story, are the outcome of economic policies, past and present, that have failed to share the wealth of Nairobi's expansion fairly with the city's poorest inhabitants, which supports this article's thesis. Structurally similar, 'Andaki' argues from another perspective, presenting the protagonist's criminality as a rational response to a city that provides him with no viable means of survival other than crime, an economic exclusion in which he finds himself as a consequence of decades of uneven post-independence development. Both stories illustrate that this register of post-independence violence concerns not just the explicit exercise of state violence but also the non-violent and more pervasive exercise of economic marginalisation resulting from overlooked governance.

These economic narratives point to the effect of the post-independence register through two main channels, both of which are mutually reinforcing: the coercive political violence of the state (policymakers and the security apparatus) and structural violence (economic policies, wages and lack of social protection). Historically, both channels tie in with how Nyongesa and Kimani et al. describe governance, that is, formal institutional accountability is consistently overshadowed by informal solutions in an ethnically charged and personalised arena of power. What the literary treatment adds to this historical documentation is a voice that shows how these failures at the macro level are experienced at the micro level of lived lives: Fawzia's grievance and quest for revenge, Nyokabi's dilemma over what to do when her mother works below her dignity for her daughter's sake, and Andaki's stifled dreams of economic advancement.

5.3 Pathways Out of Decay: Resistance and Reclamation

Although the stories reveal decay that has built up over long periods, Nairobi Noir does not present it as irreversible. Several stories hint at windows of resistance at various historical and social levels. At the individual level, the events of 'The Hermit in the Helmet' can be interpreted as a symbolic rejection of the colonial tool itself, even though Kanage's rejection is not expressed in a single event and is not enough to reverse the colonial legacy. In terms of political practice, 'Plot 10' gestures to youth-led 'protest' as a viable, if limited and contained, capacity for collective action and resistance to a corrupted institutional system, and thus the anthology at least offers a provisional beacon of hope for the production of politicised alternatives in response to the governance failures explored above. 'She Dug Two Graves' makes a similar historical argument on a personal plane to that of state violence: the conclusion of the story's argument suggests that the response to a systemic injustice should be systemic, that the response should be accountability rather than private vendetta, and that the way to fight an injustice, perhaps, is to hold the authorities to account.

These pathways are not consistent or certain, but one important thing about them is that they appear throughout what might otherwise be gloomy stories. This suggests that the editors of the anthology do not see

it as creating an inevitably determinist history of Nairobi but as setting very real and structurally entrenched constraints, which do not mean that personal and communal or cultural agency is impossible in the collection, even if it is often costly and uneven.

Notably, the three pathways mentioned above roughly correspond to the two historical registers developed earlier in this article. Kanage's rejection belongs to the colonial register, which explores the psychological and cultural roots of decay, while the political mobilisation gestured towards in 'Plot 10' and Fawzia's response (post-independence) are oriented towards increasing institutional accountability for decay. From this it appears that the anthology's conception of resistance does not refer to a generic condition of decay but to a variety of temporally particular mechanisms, and so to particular responses, a larger argument with which the article concurs: decay in Nairobi Noir is not a steady, undifferentiated state but a group of distinct processes that can be combated only in distinct ways.

6. Conclusion

This article has maintained that decay in these selected stories of Nairobi Noir is not a mere by-product of the city's social geographies of marginalisation, exclusion and insecurity but also a historically produced effect of a colonial spatial and psychological order that has been sustained through the failure of post-independence governance, state violence and economic marginalisation. Read against one another, and in conjunction with the historicism offered in 'She Dug Two Graves', 'Have Another Roti', 'Say You Are Not My Son' and 'Andaki', the two seemingly stylistically different stories 'The Hermit in the Helmet' and 'Have Another Roti' present a consistent chronological logic: individual predicaments are inextricably bound up with documented processes of colonial dispossession and post-independence institutional failure, and the characters of the anthology are scarcely allowed to escape the constraints of these forces through individual, heroic remedies.

This historicist approach to the anthology draws on technique- and form-based scholarship without replicating it, since its concern is the historical causes of decay rather than the formal features through which decay is rendered. Further scholarship could extend the historical context of Nairobi Noir by building on the Kenyan archival record, including that of colonial history, which goes beyond the scope of this paper, and the findings could profitably be compared with noir fiction set in other postcolonial cities, such as Lagos, Johannesburg and Accra, to help determine whether the level of patterning identified here is unique to Nairobi or represents a wider postcolonial urban experience.

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