Picaresque narrative techniques and popular literature in African prose fiction

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Abstract: The Picaresque tradition is a mode of writing that began in Spain in the 16th century and flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries throughout the rest of Europe. It is a literary tradition that has continued to influence modern fiction writing to date. The current paper examined the picaresque and popular African literature narrative techniques through conducting an in-depth analysis of the following texts; *Kill Me Quick*, *Mission to Kala, The Angels Die*, and *A Sport of Nature*. To effectively address the task, the study examined narratives and narrative techniques in the prose fiction under study. The paper then deployed the Structural Literary Theory in an effort to decode the intertextuality between the texts. The study established that the texts under study are interconnected through the main characters, especially the picaro/picara. An examination of Gustav Freytag's narrative structure was conducted and similarities and differences in the narrative structures of the texts under study was observed. The Postcolonial Literary Theory was also consulted where specific strands of the theory as propounded by Vorn Gorp, and Frantz Fanon were blended to furnish the study with the necessary theoretical backbone to exhaustively study picaresque narratives in popular literature. In conclusion, the study established that the Picaresque and Popular Literature writing modes are interconnected through the use plot and main characters. The study also established that the non-linear and episodic plot structures are the most commonly used techniques in picaresque and popular writing modes.

Keywords: Mwangian man, Narrative structure, Picaresque, Plot, Popular literature

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1. Introduction

The term Picaresque originates from the Spanish word *Picaresca* which was also derived from the term *Picaro* meaning a rogue character, while *Picara* is the female equivalent of *Picaro*. Picaresque literature, therefore, focuses on the narrative adventures of a rogue, often under-class character living in a society, and from whose perspective the actions of the story are told. The term has been fully incorporated into the metalanguage of Western national literature over the past century (Ardilla, 2017). He observes that the picaresque mode of writing is referred to as the picaresque novel in English, *novella picaresca* in Spanish, *roman picaresque* in French, and *Schelmenromanorpikarescher Roman* in German. *Плутовскойроман* is the Russian name of the term for the genre while the Italians refer to it as *romanzopicaresco*. The Danes call it genre *pikaresk-roman* while the Norwegians and the Swedes have a common name for it, the *pikareskroman*. The genre was first identified by (Aleman, 1656) in his two-part series book translated into English by James Mabee; the two-part book dubbed, *The Rogue* and the second part which is a book independent of the other but inter-connected through structure named, *The Life of Guzman de Alfarache*.

2. Literature review

The Picaresque novel has been recognized by several critics as having been the predecessor of the contemporary novel form. According to Carpentier and Medina (1998), the modern novel developed from the original picaresque form of writing. The study further notes that the picaresque addresses the reality of daily life of the ordinary man in society who is usually the protagonist and first-person narrator in a narrative. The current study while agreeing with Carpentier and Medina (1998) contends that literature is rather dynamic and not static. Therefore, the African picaresque narrative has evolved to have its distinct characteristics. The study will therefore attempt to identify the distinct features that set the African picaresque aside from the original form.

The term picaresque as is known today in literature was applied retrospectively to creative works that had a rogue character with similar attributes to the picaro/a main character published after *Lazarillo de Tormes*, anonymous and that the picaresque only became an accepted literary mode in 1605 after the publication of *Don Quixote* by Cervantes (Sieber, 1977). The study observes the book had a very different theme and voice to *Lazarillo de Tormes,* anonymous but had a rogue main character, an irregular narrative style, and was strongly ironic. The defining features of the picaresque novel have undergone a lot of changes over time through mutation, and adaptation (Godsland, 2015), while others have completely disappeared because they may have become stylistically or contextually redundant. The study argues that the picaresque has evolved to the neopicaresque which is the contemporary form of the original 16th-century genre although some defining features of the genre still exist. The study asserts that fiction that carries with it, one or more fundamental features that define the genre should also be classified as picaresque.

Wenzel argues in *Gordimer's Rendition of the Picaresque in A Sport of Nature,* that the picaresque was only accepted as a literary mode after Cervantes's *Don Quixote* publication posits that its general quality of social critique gives it universality. Wenzel says the picaresque arose as a response to the unstable and corrupt Spain society in the sixteenth century. A Spanish novel published anonymously in 1554 under the Spanish title; *Lazarillo de Tormes* is generally considered to be the first in the genre (Wenzel, 1995). The book demonstrates characteristics usually attributed to the picaresque such as realism and a Picaro who sits on the outskirts of society while fighting from within to become part of it. In the current study, several protagonists display the elements of the picaresque. Etyang (2015), creatively coins the term Mwangin Man to refer to the male protagonist in Meja Mwangi's urban fiction.

The study asserts that the male characters in Mwangi's trilogy all written in the 70s should be referred to as the Mwangin man. Etyang submits that the Mwangin Man as a character is a classic symbol of men who engage in subtle misogyny with the occasional violent misdemeanor directed towards women. The Mwangin man, Hillela, and Jean-Marie Medza among others all reveal these characteristics either through subtle or full-blown means. Yong (2022), notes that feminism, especially postcolonial feminism hinges on gender, race, and nationality amongst others. These he argues, not only defines gender, but also goes a long way to contribute to gender subjugation. Gorp (1978) singles out the political disillusionment the *Picaro* goes through in direct contrast with the gentleman in the texts. According to Martha Jacomina Wenzel, "the picaresque is, therefore, an autobiographical, retrospective account of personal experience recounted against the backdrop of a corrupt society." (Wenzel 64). Carpentier recognizes the picaresque novel as a predecessor to the modern novel as it emerged from the picaresque form which heavily relied on day-to-day realism as represented by the first-person narrator.

Following the anonymous publication of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, texts that have similar characteristics and fit right into the picaresque genre started being produced en-masse. Mateo Aleman was the first one on the stage with his book written in two parts; *Guzman de Alfarache* and the second part published in 1604. Wenzel however, points out that the tone of the narrative is what draws the line between the original picaresque publication *Lazarillo de Tormes*, anonymous, and later day picaresque texts such as *Justina*, Francisco Lopez de Ubeda. Wenzel (1995), reminds us of the history behind how the term *picaresque* started being used in retrospect to refer to literary productions that had similar characteristics to *Lazarillo de Tormes*, anonymous. At the time, the defining features of the genre were not very clear and therefore deciding whether a text fits in the genre was a matter of debate.

3. Research methodology

This study employed the qualitative research design based purely on library research aimed at achieving the main tenet of the design, which is gathering an in-depth understanding of picaresque narratives and popular fiction. The present research utilized library research as a type of qualitative research method where analysis of historical records and documents was conducted. The paper chose a sample size of four works out of a large population of African prose fiction. The four works of African prose fiction were obtained from different authors of African descent. The texts were slected using purposive sampling from North Africa, Southern Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, and East Africa, a full representation of the African continent.

The primary research question that guided the study was;what are the aspects that define works of popular literature and how have they been used in the selected texts under study?the study therefore, conducted an evaluation of the defining aspects of Popular Literature.

4. Data collection
Primary data

The primary data for this paper was sought from four texts; Yasmin Khadra's *The Angels Die***,** *A Sport of Nature* by Nadine Gordimer, Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*, and Mongo Beti's, *Mission to Kala*.

Secondary data

The study enriched its primary data with secondary data sought from journals, books, dissertations, theses, and projects obtained from the Postmodern Library and the Literature Resource Centre at Kenyatta University. The Jomo Kenyatta Library and Literature Resource Centre at the University of Nairobi was also consulted. Online journals have also been accessed through the Kenyatta University Post-Modern Library's large repository for carrying out this research.

5. Findings and discussions

In *A Sport of Nature*, Nadine Gordimer skilfully uses the non-linear narrative structure to bring out the theme of apartheid in the years before 1991 when the last repressive apartheid law was abolished. Gordimer envisions a new state where both the political and social status quo are given new identities. She creates a wide array of characters who help in advancing one of the most important messages of the text, racial segregation, an evil that bedevilled the southern African nation since 1948 when the National Party gained power. The party implemented an all-white government policy under a system called apartheid, a word derived from Afrikaans meaning 'apartness' or 'separate development'. Gordimer achieves this through the creative use of such characters as Hillela and Whaila, Aunt Olga, and Pauline, who all stand up for liberation and equality for all races not only in South Africa, but also in the neighbouring African countries such as Mozambique, and far away like Ghana.

The plot is the other narrative technique employed by writers while telling their stories. The plot has everything to do with the sequence of interconnected events within the story in a literary work and it includes aspects such as exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, flashback, flash-forward, foreshadowing, and back story. The plot reveals the cause-and-effect relationships between events that happen. The picaresque seeks to explain why some things happen while others do not within the context of the story.

Aristotle in 350 BCE first described the unified plot structure of drama using a basic triangle-shaped plot structure, which has the beginning, middle, and end. The lowest left arm he termed protasis in Greek to refer to the introduction or beginning, the highest peak in the middle of epitasis contains the crisis or dilemma, and finally, the lowest right arm is known as catastrophe and which has the resolution of the conflict. Aristotle's plot triangle is outlined in

Table 1: Aristotle's Plot Triangle
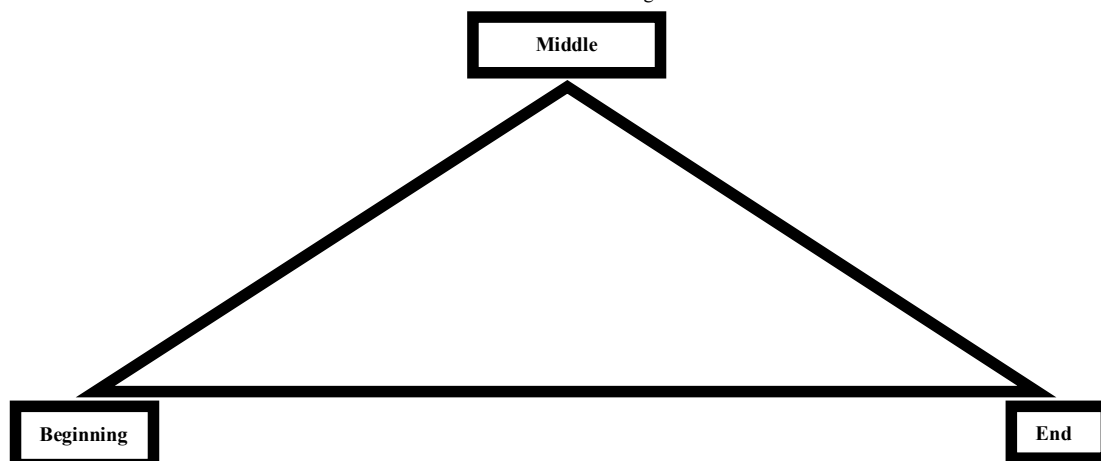
Aristotle'Pyramid was a basic flow chart of how stories are written. All stories have three peaks in the pyramid; the beginning, the middle, and the end and they are all related. Using the pyramid, Aristotle went ahead to define the plot as being character revealed by action (beginning, middle, and end) in the story. In 2015, Ryan asserted; Aristotle recognized two forms of narrative: the epic and the dramatic. Although the distinction was primarily based on the mode of presentation--the epic representing events through verbal narration (diegesis) and the dramatic through an imitation of action (mimesis) (Ryan, 2015).

According to Ryan (2015), an epic followed closely the events around the life of one character. Aristotle maintains that this plot structure "preserved the memory of glorious deeds, performed by superior beings." (Aristotle VII). While conducting an examination of the plot, Aristotle argues that the plot is the most important thing in drama. Freytag and MacEwan (1895) observed similar motifs in the plots of fiction. In the mid-19th century, Freytag devised a dramatic structure out of the common patterns he had observed from Aristotle and most other writers who had used it over the last Millenia. The study observed that there are five key stages of story-telling. The five key elements include Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution.

Table 2: Freytag's Pyramid
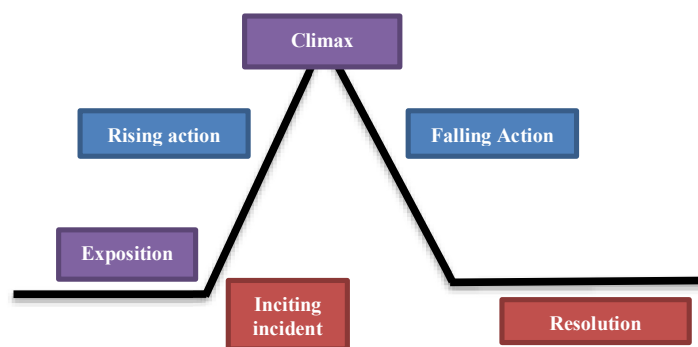
These parts of the drama, (a) introduction, (b) rise, (c) climax, (d) return or fall, (e) catastrophe, have each what is peculiar in purpose and in construction. Between them stand three important scenic effects, through which the parts are separated as well as bound together. Of these three dramatic moments, or crises, one which indicates the beginning of the stirring action, stands between the introduction and the rise; the second, the beginning of the counteraction, between the climax and the return; the third, which must rise once more before the catastrophe, between the return and the catastrophe (Freytag & MacEwan, 1895).

From his perspective, Freytag views the introduction to the story, which begins with the prologue, as an essential part of the action. He goes ahead to compare the prologue of some of the works of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Shakespeare to illustrate his point. "The prologue of Sophocles and also of Aeschylus is a thoroughly necessary and essential part of the action, having dramatic life and connection, and corresponding exactly to our opening scene; and in the old stage-management signification of the word" (36). He, however, upon examination of Shakespearian fiction, it established that the prologue was separate from the action in the main body of the story.

Exposition is the first key stage of any story. It prepares the platform through which the narrator introduces elements such as characters, style, setting, background, and general descriptions that will build up the world in which the story is created. The length of the exposition depends on the complexity of the story. The more complex the story, the longer the exposition would be. According to Freytag, it is in the exposition stage where time, place, or setting is revealed: Since it is the business of the introduction of the drama to explain the place and time of the action, the nationality and life relations of the hero, it must at once briefly characterize the environment. Besides, the poet will have opportunity here, as in a short overture, to indicate the peculiar mood of the piece, as well as the time, the greater vehemence or quiet with which the action moves forward (37).

For instance, in "A Suncrush for my sweetheart" the title of the opening chapter of *A Sport of Nature* by Nadine Gordimer, the reader is introduced to the protagonist who is named Kim, before dropping the name and opting for Hillela. The narrator also tells us that she was a school girl who was on a train heading to aunt Olga's place. In the later chapters of the book, the protagonist grows into a woman and an activist in the liberation movement. However, the writer creates the world in which the protagonist resides in the exposition stage of the book. Each writer uses a different exposition technique to create the world within which their story occupies.

Complication is the second stage in Freytag's five stages of story-telling. It is, also known as the inciting incident, and it comprises an event that sparks the beginning of the major conflict in the story. For instance, in Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*, Meja and Maina, the two teenage protagonists travel to the city in the hope of securing well-paying jobs since they had successfully completed secondary school education in the village. However, their bubble is soon busted because the postcolonial city has morphed a lot and has no time for the two and their ilk. They are turned away from every other prospective employer. The "NO VACANCY" board is shown to them more times than not, resigning them to a life of crime and delinquency.

4.1. Narratives and narrative techniques in prose fiction

The term is a derivative of the French language but has its origins in the Latin word, *narrare* meaning "to tell or to explain." A narrative is a detailed account of past events patched together to make up a story. The history of the growth and development of narratives is the same as the history of mankind and civilization. Humans have in the past, recounted their life experiences through the use of narratives in fiction or non-fictional literature. From West Africa, the 'Anansi' narratives that recounted the voyage emerged during the advent of slavery. As the folklore informs us, the trickster character travelled to the Caribbean and to the Americas to become slaves. In African American folklore, the same character who survives through his wit also exists and is referred to as 'Brother Rabbit.' In East Africa, the trickster character is represented by the Hare known as *Kaka Sungura* in the native Swahili language of the people of the region. Narrative techniques are; therefore, the various different ways writers use to communicate their stories to pass intended messages. Different narrative techniques produce different results in the perception of the messages it sends to the readers. Both Picaresque and Popular African fiction use their own distinct narrative techniques to pass their messages. Narratives are generally categorized into four broad classes; linear narratives, nonlinear narratives, interactive narration, and interactive narratives.

Linear narrative

A linear narrative or a chronological structure is a narrative where the story is told to the reader in the exact order in which the events occurred. The reader finds out what happens in the story in an ordered manner so that aspects such as flashbacks are not used. This narration style is not the most interesting way of telling a story but it leads to clarity and avoids confusion.

Non-linear narratives

Non-linear narrative structure also referred to as disrupted or disjointed narrative structure is a technique of story-telling where events do not follow a chronological order. The writer, therefore, employs the use of features such as foreshadowing, flashback, flashforward, and dream sequences. Events in the story do not follow the expected connectedness pattern of the events happening in the text. The picaresque and the popular genres of fiction writing use the non-linear narrative technique to tell their story, making them more appealing to readers than other genres, because of the style they employ to communicate certain themes.

Meja Mwangi, uses the non-linear narrative technique in his fiction writing and especially in his trilogy of urban texts, *Kill Me Quick*, *Going Down River Road*, and *The Cockroach Dance*. Just like *Dark Times are Over?* the story of Meja and Maina satirises the decay in the system, the larger society and prostitution (Aliyu, 2022). There are many instances that Mwangi has employed aspects of the non-linear storytelling technique in *Kill Me Quick*. He deploys dream sequencing, flashbacks, and foreshadowing in many instances of his narration to communicate the theme of disillusionment, helplessness, and betrayal among the urban poor in the community represented in the text. Each memory represents a phase of life that the protagonist either regrets or is very contented with the way events unfolded at the time.

The memories, which dot his urban trilogy, and especially *Kill Me Quick* under examination, are brought out through the use of the powerful narration style which combines flashbacks and dream sequencing to achieve its goal. The memories especially of the narrator are about a regrettable past or a premonition of a brighter future full of endless possibilities, unlike the untold suffering the Mwangian man goes through, hustling for the next meal on the streets of Nairobi. Mwangi's paratext at the opening of *Going Down River Road* reveals this truth. He dedicates the book to George Maina Adams and George Wamai Mumenya, his real-life friends, for introducing him to Ben, his voice in the text. He reminds us that even though the story is fictional, he has, however, met Ben, in downtown Nairobi at 'The Capricorn.' At the opening of *Kill Me Quick*, the two youths, Meja and Maina are positioned by a ditch out on the street, right next to the gutter and outside the rear door of a supermarket in the city. This Mwangi achieves through the manipulation of language. Halliday, (1985) quoted by Aliyu (2022), discusses the primary function of language. He argues, that language is the primary medium through which characters express their concerns. Language is functional. One of its functions is the interpersonal function. This interpersonal function is seen when a speaker is addressing a listener or an audience: the speaker takes some roles upon themselves. One of these roles is giving and demanding (Halliday, 1985).

Through flashback and dream sequencing, we are able to learn that the two thought of themselves as overqualified academically before their arrival in the city. Their egos are, however, deflated when they realized that not only do, they not belong among the lowest-paid casual labourers, but actually do belong in the gutters, filthy, forgotten people who nobody wants to acknowledge exist. In Going Down River Road, Ben, and Ocholla, the representatives of the Mwangian man in the text, in many instances go into feats of memory where they individually remember better and worse days of their episodic life in the city. For instance, in the first dream sequence in the text, Ben relives the last memory of his miserable life after he lost his job and was kicked out of his tenement building for non-payment of two months' rent. In reality, Ben was very miserable and would drink most nights to drown his sorrows, forget his problems, and dodge the landlord for weeks.

Wini, his girlfriend at the time would take him out on coffee dates where they would talk general matters, conspicuously avoiding discussing his futile job hunting so as not to hurt his feelings (Mwangi,1973). Wini who was already a secretary would forcefully give him some pocket money to sustain himself in the city. The sequence captures perfectly the fear and regret of the protagonist after he loses his only source of livelihood and is forced to do menial jobs at a construction site in downtown Nairobi. The landlord had confiscated most of his belongings in an attempt to recover the loss of two months' rent.

The non-linear narrative structure has several advantages over its counterpart the linear narrative structure. For instance, a non-linear narrative structure should capture the interest of the reader from the onset of the story, as it keeps shifting in time from the present to the past, to future time, and back and forth, making the reader intrigued and wanting to know more on what happens next or the history behind the status quo.

4.2. Plot sequence in Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*

Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* opens with Meja, sitting in a ditch in downtown Nairobi, waiting for Maina who had gone to steal some food supplies from a supermarket. Meja Mwangi successfully paints the picture of the two youths using very descriptive language so that it is clear in our minds that the two youths were ragged looking, dirty, and definitely were not up to any good. "I came out here raw and proud the way you are. I thought I would get a job and earn six-seven hundred shillings a month. Then I would get a house, good clothes, and food.' He paused (1)." In the city, they were unable to get even the most basic of human needs to sustain themselves. In the first few opening

paragraphs of the book, Maina reveals that together with his friends, they came to the city to look for jobs after completing their A levels.

He, however, reveals that all his friends were forced into a life of juvenile delinquency whereby they would break into people's houses at night to steal or rob them. Others joined the world of crime through pickpocketing along the streets of Nairobi whenever they could not get any sustainable food supplies from the garbage heaps. It is also at the beginning of the book that we learn Meja and Maina had left their rural homes to come to the city to earn a living after spending over twelve years in school. Maina recalls how painful it was going to school and cannot imagine life back in the village with his peers who did not go to school.

"… More than twelve years in school with fees to pay and then I go back home and just hang around; no not me, Meja. Imagine how my friends who never went to school and always stayed at home will laugh! I believe that I have a right to something better if only for the effort I put into those examination weeks" (Mwangi, 1973: 3). Maina is, therefore, not about to give up. He will soldier on in the city even if it means trying his hand at crime especially pick pocketing despite his lack of athleticism. In the years prior to 1973 when Meja Mwangi published the book, the Kenyan economy was quite robust, and the Kenyan shilling was quite strong with an exchange rate of KSh7 to the US Dollar. Unemployment rates were not alarming and affordable housing in urban areas was not that bad. However, in 1973, the year of publication of the book, things started going south following the oil crisis of 1973-1974. Rural to urban migration increased and as a result, urban unemployment reached an all-time high. Informal settlements started increasing as there was no access to affordable housing in the city.

The post-colonial state at the time was also unable to achieve much industrial and economic growth which would have translated directly to more jobs for the youth. Economic growth would also guarantee the establishment of clean and affordable housing in the city. However, Neo-colonialism was also affecting the new state even before the colonial hang-over had been done away with. Mismanagement of the State through corruption, nepotism, witch hunt, and political assassinations were widespread in government. Tom Mboya was assassinated by Nahashon Njoroge on the 5th of July 1969. Josiah Mwangi Kariuki was yet another political on 2/3/1975.

Pio Gama Pinto was the first Kenyan politician to be murdered by Kisilu Mutua. Pinto was 38 years old and his death was directly linked to Kenyatta. Others saw that Pinto was a vowed communist with links to the Mozambican liberation movement by neo-colonial forces. He worked with the colonial times and the daily chronicle. In 1954, five months following his wedding to Emma Dias he has rounded up in the notorious operation Anvil and spent four years in detention on Manda Island. He was kept in confinement from early 1958 until October 1959 at Kabarnet. He founded Kanu newspaper Sauti ya Kanu and later Pan African Press. He openly campaigned for KANU in the 1961 elections which it won. He was elected a Member of the Central Legislative Assembly and in July 1964 was appointed a specially elected member of the House of representatives a Kenyan journalist and politician and freedom fighter who was assassinated on the 24th of February in 1965 outside his home in Nairobi.

The leaders in government were only interested in their very own selfish interests at the expense of the population. Only a handful of people were controlling the means of production and they were only allowing relatives and friends to access privileges. The then President, Mzee Jommo Kenyatta, a former freedom fighter had only been in power for less than ten years following the country gaining its independence from Britain on the 12th of December 1963 and thereafter becoming a republic. As the story progresses, so does the building up of action, making the story more interesting and exciting. In this next stage known as the rising action stage, the complication in the story is explored up to its climax. This is the stage where a matter becomes complicated with rising action in the story. The protagonist may make a decision or not take one which will affect the progression of the story. It is also in this stage that the antagonist will hurt the protagonist in one way or another. Most of the story is told in this stage and therefore it longest in length. In Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*, the chapter containing Medza's visit to the village of Kala would be the rising action stage of Beti's story.

4.3. Plot sequence in 'Mission to Kala'

Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* opens with the first-person narrator Jean-Pierre Medza on a journey back home after failing the baccalaureate exams. Medza is greatly affected by his failure and after some persuasion, he sets on a mission to retrieve a runaway wife from his uncle Niam. However, the estranged wife of Niam is not even in Kala as she has run away again with another man. He sets out to Kala, a village still behind on civilization. He takes advantage of this situation and begins a series of dinners with the villagers as he narrates to them what civilization looks like in the process, he is paid in gifts of livestock, mainly sheep.

He gets time to interact with the villagers and makes friends with the cronies of his cousin Zambo. They all have names which have been given to them as a direct result of their physical attributes, character, age and morality. They include; the Boneless Wonder, Duckfoot Johny, and Petrus Son-of-God. Naming of children in Africa is determined by various circumstances such as tradition, political affiliation, religious inclination, social interaction, ambition and so many others surrounding the parents of the child in question (Olumba et al., 2022). The group enjoys several sessions of palm-wine drinking. However, Medza falls in love with the daughter of the chief, Edima, and his illicit affair is soon discovered by the Chief. He is sent away back to his village with his new wife tagging along.

In the next stage, referred to as climax, the greatest tension in the story is revealed. It contains the most exciting and intriguing of moments witnessed already in the story. It marks a turning point in the story. It may be one scene or a series of several scenes that add up to the climax. For instance, in *The Angels Die* by Yasmina Khadra, the Algerian

antihero Turambo, in whose perspective the story is told, punches a customer at a garage he was working in. Turambo had a known short-temper which led him to the boxing ring after the incident which could very well mark the climax of the book. This is because the events that surround the altercation by Turambo are probably the most interesting in the book. In Yasmina Khadra's, *The Angels Die*, the story revolves around the life of Turambo, an Arab-Berber named after his home village that was swept away following heavy rains. Turambo dreams of a better life and he gets a chance for a good life when his family moves to Oran city and he takes it upon himself to find menial jobs to eke out a living. Turambo shined shoes, washed pots in brothels, and hustled on the streets of Sidi-bel-Abbès.

In Oran, Turambo's mother gets a cleaning job in the home of a bed-ridden half-Jewish, half-Italian lady who had a son named Gino. Turambo establishes a friendship with the lady's son. The story is told of Turambo's rise from oblivion, practically having nothing to becoming the best boxer in the country and his life story plays out like a boxing fight in a ring, full of drama and unexpected recoveries. His life seems to duck and avoid all manner of heroisms that face him whether it's the adverse effects of poverty, the colonial process, religion, and love. Turambo gets frustrated trying to win the love of Nora, his cousin, and takes his frustrations to the gym after the following advice from his mother on love. "Love is the privilege of the rich…The poor don't have access to it. Their world is too wretched to accommodate a dream; their romance is a sham."

He is pushed to violence after the betrothal of Nora to a rich man from Freda and his left hook proves to be very effective and reliable in his quest to break class barriers in colonial Algeria where Arab-Berbers sat at the bottom of the class structure. His boxing career blossoms and begins to earn him a reputation in the city and he soon attracts the attention of Aida, a prostitute this marks the beginning of his roller-coaster ride from rags to riches and finally to the guillotine. The next stage; falling action, comes soon after the climax in the story is achieved and it leads us toward the end of the story. Falling action in *Mission to Kala*, the protagonist's eventual fall begins to take shape. He for instance starts an illicit affair with Edima, the Chief's daughter. He slowly starts to forget the mission that had taken him to Kala. He had visited Niam's father-in-law, the first day after his arrival. He is dismissed by the father-in-law and asked to return whenever Niam's wife returns. Medza, however, begins a series of parties during the day with his cronies and at night he spends time with the villagers giving them lectures on formal education mostly.

Resolution is the opposite of exposition; it comprises all the events that follow after the climax. The storyteller usually leaves us with answered questions or at times unanswered questions that require us to fill in on ourselves and make a conclusion. Below, are types of plots:

1. **Progressive plot:** The progressive plot structure follows a chronological order of events. First, it establishes the setting of the story as well as the conflict. Rising action, climax then denouement soon follow.
2. **Episodic plot:** This structure consists of a series of loosely connected episodes that can be chapters long and share common themes, characters and ideas. Through this plot structure, the reader gets to explore the personalities of the characters deeper. Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*, *A Sport of Nature* by Nadine Gordimer, Yasmina Khadra's *The Angels Die*, and Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* are perfect examples of texts that use the episodic plot structure.
3. **Parallel plot:** The writer merges two or more dramatic plots in one story which is usually linked by a common character and a similar theme. Characters usually start out together than separate and follow different paths, with a possibility of connecting at the end. Writers using this plot structure may introduce two main characters separately as they give parallel information on the two. For example, in Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*, the reader has introduced to both Meja and Maina text, the two protagonists whose life follows a similar path in the volatile city as they search for jobs.

The two are eventually separated and are reunited in cell 999: The den of the most crooked ruffians in the country. Meja is placed on a parallel plot with that of Maina and in the process, we learn of his great disillusionment that made him contemplate suicide. This plot structure entails recounting past events while narrating the present in story-telling, so as to give the audience, a firm background of the story. Flashbacks can appear more than once in a single story. Some writers even start telling stories using flashbacks allowing them to begin telling stories in the midst of the action.

Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* is written using this plot structure. In the opening chapter of the book, we are introduced to Jean Marie Medza the protagonist who is traveling from Ongola to Vimili by bus after failing his baccalaureate exams. However, after several challenges on the road due to poor roads and heavy rain, the bus is forced to abandon its journey ten miles to its destination as a result of a closed road. It is at this point the narrator meets his youngest aunt Amou who was riding a bicycle. The narrator then goes into the first flashback in the text to explain to the reader that Amou was a widow whose husband died very young and she had returned to stay at home.

The narrator also reveals in the flashback that her aunt had never truly learned how to ride a bicycle. The narrator is yet another flashback in the same opening chapter, goes into detail to explain a traditional cultural practice among his community that would be strange to outsiders. In the community where the narrator comes from, it was not big of a crime if a married woman was caught in an unfaithful relationship with another man from the same community. However, the further away the man involved in the infidelity, the more scandalous the illicit affair. This flashback helps the reader understand that the crime Mrs. Niam was being accused of was not that serious. This important piece of information about his culture was handed to him by his mother.

4.4. Conflict

All stories must contain a conflict. Some stories and storytellers include two or even more conflicts in a single story. However, there are four main types of conflicts in fiction writing and story-telling:

    (a). The protagonist against another.
    (b). The protagonist against society.
    (c). The protagonist is against nature.
    (d). The protagonist against self.

In *Kill Me Quick*, the protagonists are always in a state of conflict with society, nature, self, or one another. Meja Mwangi first introduces several conflicts the protagonists face through a poem that he inserts at the opening of the book. The poem, found on the preliminary pages of the book is below:

    Days run out for me,
    Life goes from bad to worse,
    Very soon, very much soon,
    Time will lead me to the end,
    Very well. So be it.
    But one thing I beg of you.
    If the sun must set for me,
    If all must come to an end,
    If you must be rid of me,
    The way you have done with all my friends,
    If you must kill me,
    Do so fast.
    KILL ME QUICK (Mwangi, 1973: 0)

From the poem, we are able to discern the various conflicts the protagonists will face in the text. The very first conflict we are introduced to is the conflict between the protagonist and nature. Meja and Maina seem to have resigned to the fact that nature has conspired against the two of them to deny them job opportunities. The two had finished their secondary school education and had travelled to the capital city like everyone else in the search of employment opportunities. The second conflict introduced to the readers in the poem is the conflict between the two teenage protagonists and society.

The pair are convinced that the city dwellers that represent the society they live in, are insensitive and hell-bent on them progressing in life through getting employment opportunities. The two are unable to secure jobs that their academic certificates entitle them to. Many instances in the book can verify their claim. Despite their willingness to offer their services to sweep the streets, wash dishes at roadside hotels, and chop firewood on the outskirts of the city, they still are deprived of employment opportunities. First of all, the scrap metal dealer, who the two boys engage in an attempt to sell some scrap metal tries to cheat them of their goods. They initially had not planned to sell the scraped metal to him but the impoverished lives of the two force them to engage with the unscrupulous dealer.

Old and battered aluminium utensils, copper wiring, bottles, cans, and general scrap metal were to be found in plenty in the rubbish bins. They collected these and sold them to some person who had the privilege of reaching the big dealers. Everything of any economic value went via the middle man to enormous scrap metal dumps on the outskirts of the city. From there only the devil could tell where it next landed. During this big business season, the boys learned one thing. Whatever you did, no matter how you did it, nothing ever paid. Everybody tried to cheat you, from the ragged scrap metal buyer to the barrel woman for whom you chopped wood (Mwangi, 1973: 10).

Eventually, Meja and Maina meet Boi, an agent for a white man who offers them employment in farmland with accommodation on the outskirts of the city. They were a bit sceptical about the job offer but they take it since it promised hope for a brighter future and the fact that they had nothing else to fall back to. However, the employment opportunity immediately opens another two new conflicts in the book. The conflicts between the protagonists and society as well as the protagonists and nature take centre stage on the farm. The two felt the sixty shillings they were being paid per month for their labour on the farm was not sufficient to sustain them as well as their families. Meja and Maina eventually leave the farm and head straight back to the backstreets of Nairobi, because of the many transgressions against them on the farm by Boi. Sometimes they would be denied their ration of food, and at times their stipend would be slashed by half.

The sixty shillings they were paid each month was hardly enough to exist on. But by scaling his needs almost to the level of starvation he did manage to save at least one pound every month. His family would need at least twenty times that amount for their daily needs each month. That to Meja meant that they were living at minus twenty pounds every month. So, they rarely talked about their homes and family, all they thought of was food and a place to lay their needs when night came. And the world was dark, cold, lonely, and miserable (Mwangi, 1973: 22).

The conditions within which the two lived on the farm were horrid. The hut in which they stay was in a despicable state of occupancy. The location of the huts as well is highly overpopulated and is inhabited by not only humans but livestock, dogs, and chickens as well. The huts were clustered together with the chicken runs and dog kennels in a

small area. The duo is placed in different huts but were all located near the dustbins in the compound. The quote below illustrates the squalor in Meja's hut:

They were given a hut which was located near the dustbins. "Meja's hut was flea-land, and the whole circular w all practically plastered with bed bugs. The floor lay as when it was first created with the rest of the world, rough, corrugated, and at least a foot deep in fine dust. Evil black soot hung from the roof like giant stalactites, so heavy that the thatching was caving in .... the window was much wider and taller than the door and about a foot off the ground (Mwangi, 1973: 16).

The third conflict found within the same story is the conflict between Meja and himself. He is disillusioned to the point of contemplating suicide.

4.5. Emergent ideas from the fiction

The main ideas that writers advance through fiction are mostly communicated through themes or central ideas in literary texts. These ideas or bodies of ideas are usually woven into the story in a way that it would be easy to decipher the meaning intended by the storytellers. The study has established some themes common to both Picaresque and Popular African Literature. Writers usually comment on these themes in their books making them the dominant idea of the book.

Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of "minorities" within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South (Bhabha, 1994). He illuminates the many ways the colonial process did not end after regaining independence by colonies and that it is not buried in the past, but exists even in the present. The colonial masters may have handed over power to the natives but colonialism makes an uncanny return in many ways in the present. Some other common themes found in Picaresque narratives and Popular African literature include; HIV/AIDS, human rights, racial discrimination, postcolonial disillusionment, racial discrimination, coming of age, alienation, and appearances versus reality.

There is a concentration on the perennial dissonance among individuals, especially as this discord manifests itself in the areas of prime interest to the novelist – social classes, races, genders, religions, politics, and domestics. It presents a harsh account of urban life in postcolonial Kenya. His fiction reveals that one major unfortunate problem runs through the (neo)colonial African societies – frustration or betrayal of trust (Kehinde, 2004).

African literature is attached to the varied experiences of the African People. African writers have, therefore, not shied away from highlighting these experiences through the themes and ideas they bring forth in their stories. Political, socio-economic, and cultural ideas have all been carried in the works of African literature. African writers have an enduring propensity for social and political commitment. Their texts mostly reflect and refract the socio-political events in their societies (Kehinde, 2004).

4.5.1. Political disillusionment

Meja Mwangi, a prolific Kenyan writer, has highlighted the postcolonial disillusionment in his award-wining book; *Kill Me Quick*. The protagonists have struggled for many years to acquire their secondary school education and have travelled to the city of Nairobi, with the hope of securing meaningful employment. However, their hopes are soon dashed as they are dismissed upon inquiry from every other potential employment opportunity. Maina scoffs at this saying: "I had big dreams […] I would get a job, earn a lot of money, wear a suit, buy a car, a house, a wife, and be a man." (Mwangi, 1973). The duo, unsuccessfully, try out their luck on the streets for menial jobs and get disillusioned by the hostile environment the city provides. The two had hardly finished their schooling experience and therefore, even language of communication was a problem to them. Just like in the Nigerian society at the time of independence and soon after. Moreover, it has been argued that a specific Nigerian undergraduate student's ethnic group orientation often play a role in weakening their communicative competence in English. (Muhammad, 2022).

Meja had been in the city three days and was yet to find something that did not worry him. The busy, indifferent people, the endless traffic, and the high buildings filled him with more awe than wonder. It appeared he had landed in a strange and hostile place where everyone was a foe, every vehicle a charging beast, and every building a dark cave. How would he survive, let alone make it here? (Mwangi, 1973). Eventually, they land underpaying jobs as farm hands on a farm owned by a white man only known as Big Man, located on the outskirts of the city. Boi, the native who connected them with the employment, however, harasses the duo by denying them their food ration, slashing their monthly allowance of sixty shillings by half, and of course, assigning them hard labour.

The living conditions on the farmland were also horrid and full of squalor. They eventually desert the employment following a confrontation between Boi and the foreman and the two antiheroes are blamed for breaking and stealing into the Big Man's bedroom. They are dismissed and driven out of the farm. The duo head back to the backstreets of Nairobi with a renewed hope of securing better jobs. Meja is, however, separated from Maina after he was caught, beaten, and left for dead by the city crowds, for stealing oranges from a supermarket downtown.

Maina, reluctantly joins a gang of thieves where he is forced into juvenile delinquency and crime in order to provide for himself and his gang, his new family headed by 'The Razor,' a gang leader who claims attended lower primary school with Maina. He successfully makes it as a thief and pickpocket with the help and mentorship of other experienced, hardcore gang members such as the Professor. The pair are reunited in prison as Meja tries his hand at a quarry and later becomes a robber. The two protagonists are a reflection of the disillusionment faced by the millions of

Kenyan youths who receive an education but fail to secure meaningful employment after finishing their studies. They prefer being in prison rather than on the outside and therefore, keep committing crimes.

Life outside is hard, Affande," Meja said? "I have not eaten for two weeks. They don't waste food on remand prisoners anymore. I had to plead guilty or starve to death in police cells, "[…] They always returned full of anger and excuses and blaming society, destiny, upbringing, tribalism, and everyone but themselves. "What can I do?" they cried. "I can't get a job, the government is corrupt, society is mean like herd and God does not care. What else can I do, Affande?" Some of them cried real tears when they arrived back. "I am only a man?" they said. "If God wanted me to change, he would make me? (Mwangi, 1973: 139, 141).

Yasmina Khadra also highlights postcolonial disillusionment in his book *The Angels Die*. Turambo, the protagonist is disillusioned by the crippling poverty he is born into. His mountainside home village of Turambo was washed away by floods when he was young and they were forced to flee and start over fresh at Graba. The new village is not any better, and is described as being "an open-air asylum . . . [where] a tidal wave had swept across the hinterland and tons of human flotsam and jetsam had somehow been tossed here." (Khadra, 2017). Turambo finds Graba filled with excessive human misery, abject poverty, hopelessness, and grim dreams of one day leaving the town for a better future. The fact that his perspective is that of an innocent child, makes the themes even more real to the reader. His family eventually migrate once again to the city of Oran, where a lot of hope and prospects of a bright future are boundless.

4.5.2. Racial discrimination

The themes of racism, corruption, struggle for liberation, and gender equality is common themes in African literature, and Meja Mwangi, Yasmina Khadra, and Nadine Gordimer, all award-winning writers, whose texts are under study have majored in them. Khadra, however, paints a very grim picture of the effects of the French invasion of Algeria on the 19th of June 1830. French forces under the command of Louis-Auguste-Victor, Count de Ghaisnes de Bourmont, seized Algiers and the coastal strip of the country. French Language was therefore, seen as the language of the elite while Arabic was seen as a language of the lower classes in society. Hence, in projecting the culture of the people, translation becomes inevitable channel of communication for comprehension of cultural ideas from source to target languages. (Taiwo, 2022). Wakarindi et al. (2022) while examining the elaboration strategies of Gikuyu language, stresses the importance of studying native languages, noting that, for instance, they unite the native speakers and also bear the values of the speakers. Corruption is also rife in the new colonies. Ordu (2022) argues that developing nations like Nigeria have corruption at the foundation of most of their economic, political, and social problems.

This marked the beginning of France's conquest of Algeria, and the start of a series of armed resistance, especially from the interior of the country. The French administration's response was to deploy more military force to quell the resistance, and most importantly, colonize the natives. The colonization process was strongly resisted by the natives especially because French farmers started arriving in droves from Paris and acquiring large tracts of farmland and in the process leaving them as squatters on their own ancestral land. Within a ten-year period, the French-owned large agricultural fields, and built value addition factories while receiving cheap local labour from the natives. The colonial rule came to an end on the 18th of March 1962, marking the end of 130 years of French rule.

Just as part of Ukraine has been annexed by Russia, some parts of Nigeria have consistently asked for independence, and this has been met with stiff opposition. Ebim (2016:10) observes that there was constant suppression from the federal government in a bit to conquer the minority people of the oil-producing Niger Delta region of the country. The colonial period is what Khadra captures and the racial discrimination that came along with it. The narrator, tells us that being an Arab or a Berber meant being oppressed and insulted every day. The protagonist, Turambo, the name of his home village which was washed off by floods, an event which resembles the Mostaganem Flood of 1927 which killed more than two thousand Algerians mostly women and children in Northwest Algeria. Turambo represents the many Arabs who live in abject poverty, are uneducated, and survive mainly through their wit. The conditions in which they live are deplorable and when his family moves to the city of Oran, seeking greener pastures, the issue of racial discrimination begins knocking as he and his family are exposed more to the Europeans.

The racial tension in Oran finally wears down Turambo who has a loose temper, and he loses his cool and knocks out cold a customer at a garage he was working at, his life then takes a turn, and he ends up becoming a professional boxer after De Stefano, a gym manager spots his talent. The racial tension in the book comes to the limelight when De Stefano, a European together with his all-white team, only accepts Turambo as one of their own because of his talent in the boxing ring which translates to more money for them.

4.6. Contribution of the study and implications

There exists a paucity of critical studies on both picaresque narratives and popular literature in African fiction yet the two modes of writing have had a great influence on the growth and development of African fiction. "Much research on language (specifically the English language), race and ethnicity has focused on how the teaching and learning of the English language across the globe today continue to position former colonised peoples as problems in relation to their language practices" (Nyamko 2022). African prose fiction has much more to offer and the implications of a study on the picaresque narratives and popular literature is therefore, a major contribution to literary studies.

The trickster narratives found in almost all traditional cultures such as of Anansi from West Africa (The Ashanti from Southern Ghana) and the hare and tortoise tales from East Africa all carry characteristics of the picaresque mode of writing. Both Anansi and the Hare in these popular African tales carry heavy semblance to the picaro in terms of

demeanor and compendium of opposites. The fiction writers whom this research will study (Meja Mwangi, Yasmina Khadra, Mongo Beti, and Nadine Gordimer) are award-winning writers principally in their fictional works which this research proposes to study. Their work is therefore deserving of a study of this proportion to establish their contribution to the growth and development of popular African literature with picaresque characteristics.

Nadine Gordimer was accorded the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature and the words of Alfred Nobel, "She is a woman who through her magnificent epic writing has been of great benefit to humanity." She also bagged the 1972 Booker Prize, accolades that make her a writer worth studying. Like Meja Mwangi who did not complete his university education at the then Kenyatta College, Gordimer did not go beyond the first year at the University of Witwatersrand after abandoning her studies, she moved to Johannesburg where she continued to write and publish short stories mainly in local South African magazines. The fact that both Gordimer and Mwangi did not emerge from the university fraternity sets them aside from other writers of African fiction. The actuality that they have gone ahead to bag several awards despite not belonging to the university generation of writers makes their work worth studying. Kurtz says that Mwangi has always been unusual among Kenyan writers in that he did not emerge from the university community. Mwangi just like Gordimer has won several awards which include the 1974 and 1977 Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature for *Kill Me Quick*, a text that will undergo critical analysis in the current proposed study.

Mwangi's diversity as a writer has won him the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature for works in six different categories, a feat, no other writer in the country has achieved to date. Other awards include the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature for *Going Down River Road*, and the 1978 Lotus Award (Afro-Asian Writers' Association). He also won the 1992 German Youth Literature Prize for his young adult thriller *Little White Man,* and another Jomo Kenyatta Prize (2001) for *The Last Plague*. Mwangi went on to win the 2001 National Book Week Award (Kenya) for *The Last Plague* and was nominated for the 2002 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, for *The Last Plague*, the 2005 Society of School Librarians International Honor Book Award (USA), for *The Mzungu Boy*, the 2006 American Library Association National Book for Children Award, for *The Mzungu Boy* and the Children's 2006 Africana Book Award (best book for older readers), for *The Mzungu Boy*.

Mongo Beti won the 1958 Prix Sainte-Beuve, a French literary prize for *Mission to Kala*. It is awarded annually to writers in the categories of prose, poetry, and essays. The choice of texts under study is justified because the four texts are fully representative of the problem under study and they all belong to the picaresque genre as defined by Thrall and Hibbard. The texts have also proven to be popular not only in their mother country but globally and hence belong firmly to the Popular Literature genre. Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* for example has been translated into several languages and has even been developed into a film just like most of his other texts. The translations of the texts into several languages contributes greatly to the readership perception of the audience. Benki et al. (2022), studies the perception of language in fiction. It may provoke anger, discard relationship and it may relate people, depending on the choice of words and manner of their usages Benki et al (Benki et al., 2022). All the other texts studied have also won different literary awards, a feat that shows they are all crème de la crème texts.

5. Conclusion

The paper conducted an examination of the distinct African Picaresque characteristics in the selected works of prose fiction under study. The chapter established that the texts under study, *Kill Me Quick*, *A Sport of Nature*, *Mission to Kala*, and *The Angels Die*, all have common characteristics which stand out from the original Spanish picaresque narrative. Gustavo Freytag's pyramid of the dramatic structure was then deployed to help the study deduce similarities in the narrative structure under examination. The study established that indeed narratives have different techniques within which they internally address their functions in fiction. The varied techniques all contribute to the overall idea of the text. The paper cross-examined basic elements of narrative structure common to picaresque narratives and unique to popular African fiction. The elements examined in detail were plot and theme.

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