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## Interview with Meja Mwangi

### Abstract

Bernth Lindfors interviewed Meja Mwangi when he was in Kenya in the autumn of 1978. When and why did you begin writing?

# Meja Mwangi

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## INTERVIEW

Bernth Lindfors interviewed Meja Mwangi when he was in Kenya in the autumn of 1978.

*When and why did you begin writing?*

I began writing around 1965 or 1966 when I was in secondary school at Nanyuki, my hometown. I wrote because I had a story to tell. That story, recently published under the title *Taste of Death*, dealt with the Mau Mau from the point of view of somebody who took part in the movement. It's not actually an historical novel, but it is based on historical events, on more or less a true story, and I thought that this experience ought to be shared with other Kenyans, particularly just after independence.

Mau Mau was a very important event in Kenya's history, and I still feel that so far not enough has been written about this crucial stage of our development. Unless it is written now, it will fade from our memory, so it is very necessary that it be recorded today by the generation that lived through it.

*You must have been quite young yourself during the Mau Mau era. Do you have personal recollections of it?*

Oh, yes. Everybody growing up at that time who wasn't a baby couldn't help getting involved in it. I don't mean involved in the action, the fighting or anything like that. You just couldn't help feeling the tension of the conflict between the forest fighters and the colonial government. Everyone was caught up in this big movement.

*Were you influenced at all by what others had written on this theme, particularly Ngugi?*

The only novel I had read on this subject before I started writing was Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child*. It encouraged me because it was closer to me than anything I had read before. The books I had read earlier were written by Europeans and were alien to me. But here was something that related to Kenyans as people. So the story *Taste of Death* was in a way encouraged by Ngugi's treatment of the Mau Mau theme in *Weep Not, Child*. I hadn't yet read *The River Between*.

*How much of the action in Taste of Death and in your other novel about Mau Mau, Carcase for Hounds, is based on actual events? How much is fact and how much fiction?*

A lot of the action in these stories is based on actual events, but I also use a lot of imagination to cover up for the facts which I don't have. The novels are a fairly accurate reflection of happenings here and there, and I did have specific people in mind when creating some of the characters. These were not people so great that they would be known by many others – not heroes like Dedan Kimathi or anybody like that. They were just people I knew through my own family. The story about the massacre, the ambush and so on in *Taste of Death* is a story I had heard discussed a long time ago by someone in my family who had just been released from detention.

*Taste of Death is a rather depressing story. A group of forest fighters is struggling for survival against overwhelming odds, and in the end they are exterminated. Why this kind of perspective on the Mau Mau? It looks as if the freedom fighters are defeated.*

Yes, it does, but in fact they are not. What I was trying to say

there is that these people never gave up, even though they were no match for the colonial forces. Let's face it: there is no way they could have won the war militarily. Yet, in spite of being outnumbered, outgunned and overwhelmed, they kept on fighting, hoping that something would come to their rescue, would help them out of the situation. Eventually, when Haraka, the hero of the novel, gets killed, his spirit symbolically lives on. This was the point I was trying to stress: the spirit of resistance lived on. The fact that one little band was wiped out did not mean that the movement died.

*In the late 1960s Chinua Achebe, who had previously felt that it was very important to write about the past, stated that the African author who ignored present-day realities and remained preoccupied with the past, would end up being totally irrelevant to his society. How do you feel about this?*

I don't consider myself as preoccupied with the past, as you can see from reading *Kill Me Quick*. It's just that I feel that there are certain things that still have got to be written. Mau Mau didn't happen in the so distant past anyway. And not enough has been written about it so that we can leave it behind and turn to other things. I just keep on tackling certain issues that have not been tackled so far. In fact, I think I may write a couple more books about the Mau Mau. In the meantime, I'll continue to write about the present.

*Why did you write Kill Me Quick?*

In the early 1970s a number of my friends had just finished secondary school and couldn't find jobs. I felt it was important to tell their story, to show their plight in the city. I don't think anybody here had written anything about such people yet – about the hopes and aspirations of one who comes out of school and discovers desperation in the city. I felt that the problems of these people ought to be brought to the attention of the rest of the society.

*I understand you have a new novel coming out shortly called Going Down River Road. What is this about?*

It also deals with contemporary urban problems. It's about the life of construction labourers in Nairobi. This again is a story that hasn't been told yet. Nobody to my knowledge has tried to explore in depth the lot of the ordinary labourer in our society. I have known and lived among such people. The story is based on personal observations.

The same is true of the quarry episode in *Kill Me Quick*. That's based to some extent on personal experience too. I lived for about a year next to a quarry.

*What are you writing now?*

I am working on a number of novels simultaneously. I haven't decided which one to finish first. One of them called *The Cockroach Dance* is more like *Kill Me Quick* and *Going Down River Road* than like my Mau Mau novels. It examines the life of one person in our society who has got a job he doesn't like.

Another one I am working on presents the case of a young man who goes abroad to study and is faced with a choice between coming back home and staying where he is. He examines all the arguments for and against and eventually makes his decision. When I was in the United States, I met a lot of East Africans on my travels through San Francisco, Washington and Chicago. As we talked, I realized that there was a great need to tell their sad story. I hope to go back and learn more about this situation before finishing this novel.

*Is it true that you are supporting yourself entirely by your writing?*

Yes.

*I have noticed that you have written a lot of short stories for local magazines. Do such publications pay well enough to sustain a professional writer here?*

Not really. There are too few of them, and they do not pay much for stories. *Joe Magazine*, *Drum*, *Trust*, and a new Nairobi journal called *Umma* buy stories, but the newspapers here never do, and it's very difficult for us to sell short stories in Europe or America. There aren't enough outlets for short fiction here.

*Do literary competitions tend to encourage writing here? Ngugi, for example, wrote The River Between for a competition organised by the East African Literature Bureau in the early 1960s. Has the recent establishment of the Kenyatta Prize for Literature, which you won in 1973 for Kill Me Quick, stimulated creative writing in Kenya?*

Yes, these prizes have had some effect, but again there are not enough of them. The only regular award is the Kenyatta Prize which is awarded each year for the best literary work in English and in Swahili. Maybe that has encouraged some writers, but it is rare that one writes with an award in mind.

*What do you think motivates someone in East Africa to begin writing?*

In my own case, as I said earlier, it was the urge to tell a particular story, and after that one was told, there were so many others to tell. The ideas just keep coming. There are certain ideas you want to discuss or bring to life in order to share them with your society. This desire to say something socially meaningful might motivate people to write.

*Do you think the financial motive is very strong among new writers, young writers?*

No, I don't think so. I can't think of anyone who got started that way. There are no great financial gains to be made from writing. Publishers pay so badly that you can't write for the money.

I have been trying to write full-time so that I can write more freely and can spend as much time as I need on a book. I want to

be able to devote myself entirely to writing, but of course I've got to eat and pay the rent, too, like anyone else. It can be a bit tricky at times.

If writing paid, I think we would have a lot more and better writers in East Africa. We have a lot of talented young people at the university, some of whom, I know, would like to do more writing but they can't because they have to work for a living. So literary development here tends to progress slowly.

*What about radio and television? Do they provide an outlet for writers?*

Yes and no. They sometimes broadcast plays, but writing and producing the stories is so tedious and pays so badly that there is no motivation there either. If you did do it, it would be because you wanted to write, not because you wanted to make money out of it. There is so much you have to give to such a production. The cast needs to be recruited, organized, directed, and also paid, and the whole business takes so much time and energy that afterwards you feel it wasn't worth the trouble.

*When you started writing, there was very little literature being produced in English by East Africans. Today there is a great deal. What do you think accounts for this change?*

I suppose one of the main reasons is that there are now more publishing houses so more people can get published. In the past some publishers were either too choosy or didn't publish fiction. Today there are more publishers, and the market for fiction is rising because there are a lot more readers able to read in English.

Another reason for the change is that people have realized that there is real talent right here in East Africa. We have received a lot more encouragement than in the past.

*What kind of audience is reading this new literature?*

Well, we do not yet have a reading tradition here. It's just developing. People are now beginning to buy books to read for pleasure. As it happens, the readers are mainly those people who can afford books; they are secondary school leavers and university graduates who are working and still like to read.

*There seems to be a lot of popular literature emerging in East Africa today. What do you think explains this phenomenon?*

Before this new type of writing began to emerge, readers here were hooked on European paperback thrillers – the James Bond kind of writing. Now East Africans have started publishing thrillers of their own, with local settings and local content. These appeal more to East African readers than Western paperbacks because they can relate to them easily. The demand for this kind of literature encourages writers to produce more of it. These books are absorbing part of a market that already existed, but unfortunately they are priced higher than most of the European paperbacks so they haven't quite caught up with the market yet.

*Do you think this is the direction in which East African writing is moving? Is there likely to be more of this kind of writing and less of the kind that deals with local historical events – the Mau Mau novels, for instance?*

Yes, but eventually things will even out. The popular writing can't go on and on. I mean, one can only write so much on a certain subject before the readers tire and eventually return to the more serious literature. The excitement caused by the emerging popular writing should soon settle down. There is a great future for serious writing here.

*Would people be as likely to pick up a novel by Ngugi as one by, say, David Maillu?*

That's a tricky question to answer. A lot of people who read today do not care very much for the value of the literature. It's mainly a matter of entertainment for them, and they might not understand Ngugi's style or content. Most of them are more likely to pick up a book by Maillu than one by Ngugi. The reading public has not developed to the stage where readers will carefully discriminate between serious and light reading.

*Which writers have been the most popular in East Africa?*

Maillu is the most popular. He's also the most successful since he manages to keep his publishing company going. Ngugi is very well known and respected but he appeals more to the academic mind than to the ordinary reader. I can't think of anybody else except Charles Mangua, whose novel *Son of Woman* was at one time extremely popular. Another important writer in East Africa has been Okot p'Bitek, but his very popular *Song of Lawino* is different from the works of Maillu and Mangua because there is more meaning to it. Some of these popular works have no message at all. They are simply words, words, words.

*Do you think these popular works perform any kind of useful social function?*

Only insofar as they attract bigger readership and may thus instil the reading habit in many more people. As I said earlier, there's no reading tradition in our society. You actually come across people who boast they haven't read one novel since they failed their literature exam ten or more years ago. One hopes that these readers of popular works will eventually graduate to reading more serious literature as the reading experience matures.

*Do you think these books offer an accurate reflection of life in the city?*

Yes, partially. But sometimes they are overdramatized to such an extent that they lose reality. They become completely distorted. Young people reading them may get the wrong impressions of life

in the city.

*Have you ever been tempted to write this kind of literature?*

Never. It seems very easy to do, especially if one uses a free poetic form, but I feel I can't do it. I like to develop a serious story in prose. I may try my hand at another play some day, but I want to feel completely comfortable with my prose writing before I embark on that.

I feel that the moral is far more important in writing than the entertainment. Of course, the two should go together if the story is to be considered well done. A moral shouldn't spoil a story but should give it greater value. That's the kind of story I want to write.