

## Literary Strategies in Yvonne Owuor's *Dust* and Meja Mwangi's *The Last Plague*

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**Abstract:** *A few works have been written on Owuor's *Dust* as well as Mwangi's *The Last Plague* such as by Burkeywo (2015), Liswaniso (2016) and Muindu (2015) but none has been done on their literary strategies. This study explores the strategies used in *Dust* by Yvonne Owuor (2014) and *The Last Plague* (2014) by Meja Mwangi. This paper involves the views of different critics and scholars regarding strategies and their significance. The researcher carried out a close textual analysis of the two novels using qualitative analysis. The review revealed that Owuor and Mwangi used different techniques such as narrative technique, flashback, metaphors, similes, Swahili words, and dialogue among others that helped in developing themes.*

**Keywords:** Literary strategies, Strategies in Yvonne Owuor's *Dust*, Strategies in *The Last Plague*, Literary styles

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### 1. Introduction

Literary strategies also called literary techniques or literary devices or styles are methods creators of narratives use to convey what they want. Authors make specific choices for particular reasons. Leech and Short (1981) stated that style is a way in which language is used. Allen & Widdowson (1975) adds that the value of stylistic analysis is that it can provide the means by which the learner can relate a piece of literary writing to his experience of language and thereby extend that experience. Various strategies have been employed in the novels of study to bring out meaning, themes, characterization as well as setting among others. Some of these include: narration, flashback, metaphor, similes, description and dialogue among others. This paper discusses the strategies used in Owuor's *Dust* and Mwangi's *The last plague* to bring out the themes.

Mehta (2015) posits that in fiction, techniques/strategies involve everything that goes into making the novel. Leech and short (1981) are in agreement as they define strategies as ways which the writers use to deliver their message to the general public. Khattak, Mehnaz & Ansari (2012) observed that the aim of stylistics is to describe the formal features of texts and to show their functional significance for the interpretation of the text. Ngara (1996) says that while writers are speaking independent of history, form is socially conditioned. Style arises as a result of historical and social factors. The texts under study fall under Kenya's postcolonial literature. Yvonne Owuor and Meja Mwangi attempt to create a literature with a Kenyan identity. One way of doing so is through the appropriation of the English language. Language plays a significant role as Booker (1996) writes that language carries culture and culture particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.

Most works done depict realities of various societies, thematic concerns as well as the theories used. This particular study used the strategies to depict these realities. Studies have been conducted in the novels of study: *Dust* and *The Last Plague*. For instance Burkeywo (2015) using *Dust* did a study on the Narrating of Kenyan History through Fiction but he did not capture the trauma involved. Secondly, Liswaniso (2016) conducted a research on political violence in Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope* and Owuor's *Dust*, but her concern was on the impact of political violence in families not the trauma involved.

Ndumba (2002) observed that the treatment of HIV/AIDS in *The Last Plague* has been discussed by multiple writers and the pandemic has portrayed its victims behaving in different ways. To begin with, she gives an example of Adalla's novel *Confessions of an AIDS Victim*, which examines how HIV has closed doors for Catherine Njeri, a beautiful, young and intelligent woman who learns with shock and utter disbelief that she is HIV positive which makes her an AIDS victim. This means many things to her; she cannot go ahead with her plans to study for her Masters degree in the USA and she has to start thinking like somebody who is at the end of her life. In a heart-breaking style, she makes the revelation to her long time friend, Marilyn, in the form of a letter.

According to Muindu (2015), a critical interrogation of two Kenyan novels namely: *The Last Plague* by Meja Mwangi and *The Mysterious Killer* by Joseph Situma, where he examined how the enactments of illness by the diseased characters in the two texts relate to their quest for meaning. These are among what has been done on Yvonne Owuor's *Dust* and Meja Mwangi's *The Last Plague*. Despite scholars touching some aspects on the two novels, little has been done on the strategies that are employed and this is what this study is out to carry out.

## **2. Methodology**

Study of the strategies involves linguistic analysis and literary criticism. This study will adopt the intensive review of related materials and close textual analysis of the novels, *Dust* and *The Last Plague*, using qualitative analysis procedures. To ensure validity the scholar sought the

assistance of able experts including: experienced graduates, peer colleagues, lecturers, experienced supervisors and professors to read through the work and make necessary corrections.

### 3. Results

Both Owuor and Mwangi have employed narration through the third person point of view which is also called omniscient narrator, this point of view gives room for the authors to add descriptive and narrative details that the characters do not notice (Dupriez, 1991). For instance, narration in *The Last Plague* gives the image of Janet's past and how their old house stands as a reminder, pain and regret (33). It builds suspense for we ask why the regret and then things unfold how Broker had cheated on her and left to Pwani with another woman who is later revealed as Jemina. This helps us know how and why Janet treats Broker the manner she does the first day he returns from the coast. Mwangi through narration tells us that after supper Janet locks Broker outside their house and he sleeps in his vehicle after unsuccessful attempts to drive off. Mwangi's narrator adds that Janet sarcastically gives him condoms and tells him to go to his wives so as to avoid spreading what he brought (p.176). This definitely leads us to the pain she had experienced earlier when the same Broker deserted her and the children. In *Dust* we also witness Odidi's crying during the bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi, which claimed the lives of many as well as maiming many in 1998. It helps in bringing out Akai's feelings and reactions towards the absent son as she tells Nyipir, "I want my son." This is as a result of pain and loss. It also highlights the effects of terrorism in the economic, political and social life of the nation.

It is through narration that Mwangi reveals that the primary school where teacher Paul had taught for long is dying from theft of funds. This builds the theme of corruption and mismanagement of funds. Corruption is a leading evil in the post independent African states hence a satire to these states. Yvonne Owuor also presents corruption through the story of Ali Dida's arrival from Eritrea which is also given through narration as well as how he joined the police service. Following this closely it develops the theme of weakness and corruption in the police force since Dida joined Nyipir in cattle rustling in the Northern Province, something we do not expect the police to do. Moreover, there are no details of his training as a police officer.

Description is another strategy that has been intensely used in the two novels. For instance, through description Mwangi paints an image that there are no people in Crossroads since it's only the beggar around and the old man playing one man game (p.1). It shows the impact of AIDS to the village of Crossroads that has cleared people leaving these countable few. This in turn becomes a trauma to the children since they lack parental love as well as someone to provide their needs. Its description that presents Broker as a man with sunken eyes (p.208) this is also, a reason as to why pastor Bartolomeo can't remember having baptized him (p.259). It shows the effects of HIV/AIDS to the human body that is it has consumed him beyond recognition. To add to this, when Broker comes to Crossroads as a stranger, there are a lot of suspicions about him. For instance, he is described as having a bonny face, staring eyes and

wasted features (187). This leads us to suspense whether he is also suffering from AIDS which comes out to be so as the narrative advances. Through description we are informed that upon close observation Musa notices that he, Broker is the legendary Wa Guka, the bank robber that the police have failed to catch after several attempts. Still as he hides his identity, Uncle Mark remembers him as Bakari Ben Broker at the business of Maalimu Juma, Janet's father (188).

Similarly, Mwangi tells us of a group of distraught travelers that stood huddled together and they had bundles of misery (p.4). This depicts how AIDS has made people so poor. To add on poverty, the beggar is described to be followed by a horde of flies and a pungent smell of years of neglect. This is a sign that there is a lot of poverty and neglect among the less fortunate in the village of Crossroads. This situation is also seen in Musa's room where there is an indication of filth i.e. flies, sugar ants as well as roaches (65). Moreover, when Broker goes to the home of his late girlfriend, Jemina to look for her there is a lot of description done that reveals a lot of poverty. To begin with, the buildings are said to be dilapidated and collapsing (296). Further the children in Jemina's home are described as being violent. This shows the effect of HIV/AIDS to the children since they have to learn to defend themselves in the absence of their parents. They become violent on Broker (297-8). In the same home, the children are said to be naked and out of school. This is an impact of HIV/AIDS showing poverty since no one is left to care for them. In *Dust* also poverty is portrayed through the description of the room Isaiah Bolton rents as being dirty as well as Justina, Odidi's girlfriend becoming a prostitute to earn a living.

Mwangi through description builds the theme of police brutality as the mishandling of Frank by police is thus given. They beat him up, his testicles are swollen, his underwear disheveled and he is demoralized in a cold and dark cell that is smelling (p146). This is a satire in the post-independent African nations that are torturing their members instead of protecting and defending them. It also builds up traumatic violence on the side of Frank who is locked up with criminals and it is said that in the cell there is a lot of suffering, loneliness, beatings and filthy environment (151). This is also another satire since we expect the conditions in prison cells to be better since prison is a place of correcting wrongs. We also don't expect the prisoners to be beaten since they have not been proven guilty in a court of law. The same behavior of the police is depicted by Owuor in *Dust* as she tells how Nyipir was tortured which made his hands deformed (278). It is a pointer to violence and misuses of power hence a satire in the post-independent Kenya torturing and maiming her own sons leaving them helpless. This is exactly what the colonialists were doing. Owuor also explains how Odidi is shot by the police, who are supposed to protect the people.

Flashback is another strategy that has been intensively used by the two authors. For instance, through flashback we get to understand and know Frank's ambition as a veterinary. Flashback also tells us that Frank's father was a preacher and Janet's Father was an Imam, Muslim leader. This recall helps us to see religious intolerance between Islam and Christianity as well as how Broker, a non believer won Janet, something that made her parents ashamed to the extent of moving away from Crossroads to avoid the stigma. In the flashback, we are also told that Janet almost killed herself when she conceived with Broker outside wedlock. This is because of the

societal dictates that one should not conceive before marriage (92). In *Dust* also Owuor uses flashback to tell us how Odidi lost his job, became disillusioned and joined robbery due to corruption. Flashback also tells us how Akai conceived out of wedlock and how Bolton turned against her calling her prostitute.

Dialogue has also been used to develop the themes, advance the plot and build characterization. For instance, in *The Last Plague*, dialogue ensues between characters: Frank, Uncle Mark and Musa they ask when Frank came from America and he reveals he never went as he says there is a long story behind it (26). This dialogue brings to surface the trauma caused by HIV/AIDS since it crushed the dreams of Frank just like it did to Caroline Adala's main character, Catherine Njeri in *Confessions of AIDS Victim*. For instance, there is dialogue between Petrus and Isaiah which shows that corruption is rampant up to the police force. This is because Petrus asks for a bribe to be given to Ali in order to reveal the truth about Hugh Bolton (216). This is a satire in the Kenyan police force that cannot conduct an inquiry and release the evidence freely; they must be given a bribe to accomplish it, it is also a satire on post-independent Kenya pointing at the theme of corruption in the police force.

Julia and Janet, her sister in dialogue reveal that people are attached to their dangerous customs such as wife inheritance that is one of the ways of spreading the disease. Janet tells Julia the need of bringing such customs to an end but Julia is not happy about this (52). Moreover, dialogue reveals wife inheritance in that chief Chupa wants to inherit Janet because he is rich despite him being old. Grandmother supports this idea (56). This develops the theme of male chauvinism as well as class since those that have riches like Chupa want to subdue those who are poor, the likes of Janet, no wonder AIDS is spreading at an alarming speed. Also the dialogue between Uncle Mark and Frank reveals male chauvinism in *Crossroads*, Uncle Mark says that women are supposed to be beaten and be made pregnant. Uncle Mark suggests that this can be the only thing to change Janet (65). It is a clear indication that their culture supports violence in the form of wife battering. In addition, the same dialogue between grandmother and Janet brings out Janet's character as determined and caring and that of grandmother as ignorant for she supports widow inheritance despite the rampant AIDS scourge (64). Dialogue is also used in *Dust* when Awaro and Selene discuss the occurrences at Buma. Selene asks him: "what did you see?" "Bad things memsahib (p. 95)." Definitely this reminds us of suffering, murder and maiming of the participants of war, no wonder Nyipir's brother and father never came back.

Janet dissuades Kata by means of dialogue to shun from using one knife for circumcising all the boys (103). It develops Janet's character as daring in confronting one of the ways of spreading the disease. It as well shows Kata's ignorance and greed for money as well as the ignorance of the villagers about the spread of AIDS. This leads to violence as Frank joins the argument and boys as well as men run after him ordered by Kata to re-circumcise him, a form of physical violence (106). We also see in *Dust* Ajany, Odidi's sister begging Justina, Odidi's girlfriend to go home and give birth there Odidi having been killed.

Through dialogue, a boy in Jemina's home reveals to Broker that Jemina died (298). This is an indication of the impacts of AIDS. It has claimed so many lives till some are just mentioned and their names not given. Dialogue also reveals the experience of the characters when they discover that they are HIV positive. They contemplate suicide (378), an indication of trauma as a result of AIDS and its impacts to people. The impact of AIDS is further seen by way of dialogue when Janet tells Frank that it doesn't know a priest from a prostitute (379). This shows AIDS does not spare anybody. In a conversation, Broker also reveals to Janet that all the women he squandered money with left him when they noticed he was sick (418). He adds that all could be dead by now. This develops Broker's character as open and sincere as well as develops the theme of HIV/AIDS and its impacts in killing women as a result of poverty squandering money with sick men unknowingly. Owuor has also intensely used dialogue in several instances. For example, the dialogue between Nyipir and the daughter, Ajany reveals that during the Mau Mau era secrets were kept and evil was sealed in covenants for the sake of peace in the country (68). The same also explains how Nyipir met Hugh Bolton as he was on his way to Burma looking for the brother and father (p.69). In addition, Baba Jimmy and Nyipir in conversation show the desperate state of Nyipir as he longs to see the father and brother. He asks:

"Ere baba, ere Theo?" Where are they?

"Gi biro," They are on the way (p.155)

It shows the effects of war on families, which is a trauma to those left behind like Nyipir and the mother.

Metaphors have been employed in the novels. Frank calls Kata an animal as Janet calls him a beast (75). This is because of what he does to Frank by sending youths and young men after him to beat him and re-circumcise him. It indicates that as a character he is brutal as well as violent hence developing violence as a theme. His action is not human hence compared to an animal as well as a beast. Another metaphor is that of calling AIDS witchcraft. In *The Last Plague* for instance, when Bigshoe dies (99), his wife says that his brother bewitched him out of jealousy; it shows how ignorant the people are about AIDS. This ignorance is furthered by the fact that the people of Crossroads call AIDS a plague (39). The term plague shows its devastating effects on a human body. Like a plague it deforms various parts of the body. It is called the last plague since people don't believe there can be another disease deadly like it. AIDS is also referred to as a monster that devours people (352). It shows its great negative impact in killing the people of crossroads just like monsters devour people in the folk tales mercilessly. Frank also calls the Crossroads' people a festering symmetry (121). This shows the certain deaths that they are to face because majority are HIV positive which is wasting them slowly. People fear HIV/AIDS because of its manner of attacking one's body hence those who contract the virus react differently. For instance, when Hauna, one of the women in the novel tests HIV positive she calls her husband the dog and promises to kill him (393). It develops Hauna's character as hot tempered and cruel as well as brings out the trauma she experiences at the discovery that she is positive. Moreover, Janet is called 'mama steel' then 'condom woman' (60). These terms denote her toughness in her campaign of using a condom to prevent AIDS, something men are shy from but she courageously does this. It depicts the ignorance of the people of crossroads towards AIDS. Instead of taking in Janet's advice they mock her and call her names.



In a dialogue between Uncle Mark and Frank, Mark calls Janet a man and that probably Broker left her for Pwani, Mombasa with a fat woman realizing she was another man, meaning she is very tough and doesn't condone deeds demeaning women in this society (65). Uncle Mark remarks that Janet should get a man to beat her back to womanhood, an indication that wife battering is very much alive in Crossroads, which is a trauma to women and those emancipated like Janet cannot stand it. Equally, in Owuor's *Dust* it is said that Nyipir becomes a stone after mourning the son (278). This metaphor, stone indicates the effect of pain and loss of the only son.

Similes have also been used in the two novels. In *The Last Plague*, the following are evident: Broker is said to have become as gentle as an old goat now (p.180). This is to show the change he has undergone as a result of sickness. We get another simile through Waziri wa siri who is said to be breathing like a buffalo as a result of the charts that have been pinned on the walls of his lodgings (139). It portrays rage in him as a hot tempered person since a buffalo he is compared with is a very dangerous animal. It also builds the theme of violence in case he gets to know exactly who put them there. We get another simile from *Big Youth* when he tells Broker in conversation that people die like animals in Crossroads (208). It shows how devastating the HIV/AIDS pandemic is to the human body and probably no care is given to the sick because of fear thus making them equated to animals; since the human life has even lost the dignity it deserves hence equated to animals; no wonder people don't now value communal burying due to rampant deaths. Owuor also used similes to communicate her issues and bring out characters. For instance, it is said that a man was shot as an insect because he wore AP-Police (184). This adds to police brutality, inhumanity as well as violence as a theme. It as well brings out trauma to the family members and friends. Another simile is used in talking about those who were associated with Tom Mboya that they were hunted like vermin (236). This simile shows divisions among the Kenyan people along political as well as tribal lines because Mboya was a politician and was killed because of his pressures in politics. Also in describing the action of the Mau Mau fighters a simile has been used. It is said that the men eased their way into the concealed path, rifles at the ready as silent as hunting cats. This shows their readiness to attack hence develops the theme of war and its effects. Also a priest is compared to an Ankole cow by describing him to being 'as dark haired, as ebony as an Ankole cow in the drought.' This shows the shock the priest gets at seeing the catechist Aloys Kamau being killed by the police. It depicts disrespect of human dignity.

Swahili words and phrases have been used by Mwangi and Owuor. For example, in *The Last Plague* chief Chupa calls Janet Mtumba, meaning second hand. This is a verbal abuse meant to demean and traumatize her. It portrays the chief's arrogance and opportunism as he says that fortune smiles on those chief Chupa favours (78). It also points to selfishness and opportunism in leaders who are ready to take advantage of poor and single ladies like Janet. However, Janet doesn't mind this abuse, for her life goes on and her campaign becomes more rigorous. Uncle Mark also uses Swahili word when he says it is not my shauri, it's not my business people should be warned from the monster (141). It points at individual responsibility on each person concerning the spread and curbing of AIDS in Crossroads. Also, a man tells Broker that AIDS is

a disease of men who munga munga, roam about (243), meaning the promiscuous men. This is a blame to show that immorality is one of the causes of HIV/AIDS. Similarly, Swahili words have been used also in *Dust* and such include Kwaheri (147), Tusker baridi hapa sasa hivi (151), Mokoteni, matata, jinga hayo hakuna matata, hamna matatizo among others (152). These are used to show the language of the 'matatu' people. They also authenticate the novel's setting as purely African/ Kenyan since Swahili is a national language in Kenya.

#### 4. Discussion

After the analysis of the novels *Dust* and *The Last Plague*, it was realized that Owuor and Mwangi employed language to achieve an effect. For instance, narrative technique is straight forward in *The Last Plague* hence enables the readers to understand the work. However, *Dust* requires a lot of concentration for it presents episodes through the same narration as it skips and brings in something new and much later continues to add to the first episode in that process. It has a non-linear plot unlike that of *The Last Plague*. The two writers also used a lot of flashback to bring to the attention of the readers the things that had happened in the past and link them to the present.

Description was used by the two authors to develop the themes such as corruption, poverty and betrayal among others. It also brings out the traits of characters such as Broker, Akai and Nyipir just to mention a few. Metaphors were also employed in the two novels to bring out the perception of the people towards HIV/AIDS as well as show the emotions of those people involved in trauma such as Nyipir. A metaphor according to (Alembi, 2000) is a direct comparison of two unlike things without the use of 'like' or 'as'. To paint a mental picture and bring out characterization and themes like violence and betrayal, similes were employed by both authors. Similes bring out comparison and humour as well as the irony behind the thinking of the characters. They also develop themes. According to Berner (2013), flashback is a general term for altering time sequences, taking characters back to the beginning of the tale. Swahili words have been used by the two authors. This is because Swahili is a national language in Kenya hence their use authenticates the novels as well as gives it a local flavor.

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#### 5. Conclusions

From the foregoing discussion, it has come out that style or the use of literary strategies is quite important in literature and its functions in literary works is of great significance. It has been noted that style in literature develops the themes, setting as well as characterization. It has also been noted that style adds flavor to language in literature as well as developing plot. In fact, a



literary work without style will just be flat and meaningless. Owuor and Mwangi therefore used different techniques such as narrative technique, flashback, metaphors, similes, Swahili words, and dialogue among others that helped in developing themes.

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