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# **LASU Journal of Humanities (LASUJOH)**

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## Contributors

1. Adeyemo, Julius Abioye  
Dept. of Public Relations & Advertising  
Faculty of Communication & Media Studies  
Lagos State University
2. Agbaje, Funmilayo Idowu  
Dept. of Peace, Security & Humanitarian Studies  
Faculty of Multidisciplinary Studies  
University of Ibadan, Nigeria
3. Aliu, Olayinka  
Dept. of History & International Studies  
Federal University Lokoja
4. Amende, A. Charles  
Dept. of Languages & Linguistics, Nasarawa State University, Keffi
5. Balogun, Wasiu A.  
Dept. of History & International Studies Lagos State University Ojo, Lagos
6. Bamisile, Sunday Dept. of Foreign Languages, Lagos State University.
7. Bello, Zainab,  
Dept. of Industrial Design,  
Faculty of Environmental Design, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.
8. Ishola, Tajudeen Odebode  
Lagos State University, Ojo  
Dept. of Religions & Peace Studies Peace Studies Unit
9. Lawal, Muhammed Adeyemi  
Dept. of English  
Lagos State University  
Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria
10. Modu, Ibrahim Alhaji  
Dept. of History  
University of Maiduguri
11. Mohammed, Abubakar  
Dept. of History  
University of Maiduguri
12. Muojama, Olisa Godson  
Dept. of History  
University of Ibadan
13. Ogah, Ashikeni Thomas  
Dept. of Languages & Linguistics  
Nasarawa State University Keffi
14. Okutepe, Alhaji Momoh  
Dept. of History & International Studies  
Federal University Lokoja

15. Oladejo, Olanrewaju Abdulwasii  
Dept. of Peace, Security &  
Humanitarian Studies,  
Faculty of Multidisciplinary  
Studies,  
University of Ibadan, Nigeria
16. Olatade, Damilola Peter  
Dept. of Philosophy,  
Lagos State University  
Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria
17. Saidu, Amina Ramat  
Dept. of History University of  
Maiduguri
18. Salat, Abubakar Abdulahi  
salaty.aa@unilorin.edu.ng
19. Suleiman, Abdulsalam B.  
Dept. of Religions & PeaceStudies  
Lagos State University, Ojo
20. Suleiman, Hassan Biodun  
Dept. of Journalism & Media  
Studies  
Faculty of Communication &  
Media Studies Lagos  
State University Ojo,  
Lagos.
21. Umaru, Yakubu Jacob  
Dept. of Languages & Linguistics  
Nasarawa State University, Keffi
22. Warasini, Haruna Tsingari  
Dept. of History  
University of Maiduguri
23. Yusuf, Olanrewaju, Ph.D.  
Peace & Conflict Unit,  
Dept. of Religions & PeaceStudies  
Lagos State University, Ojo

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## Social Issues in Mukoma Wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat*

Lawal, Muhammed Adeyemi

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### Abstract

*Literature is not produced in a vacuum, especially in African countries where there are several societal problems. Literary works are reflections of the experiences of the people and scholarly readings of such works help promote awareness on the state of the nation while simultaneously proffering solutions. This article, therefore, attempts a literary reading of Mukoma wa Ngugi's Nairobi Heat with a view to depicting inherent African challenges in order to provide remedies for these underlying social problems which have hindered the development of most African countries; whilst making the countries remain within the label of third world countries. The sociological criticism of literature serves as the theoretical guide for the analysis of the text. The study critically analyses the text and found that corruption, racism, bad governance and breeding of hoodlums are the major thematic preoccupations found in the text. Literary devices such as satire, metaphor and symbolism are used to tease out these inherent themes. The study deciphers that leadership failure is the crux of the challenges experienced in African countries and submits that citizens should take up the electoral responsibility to providing for themselves credible leaders.*

*Keywords: social issues, literary texts, Mukoma wa Ngugi, Nairobi Heat*

**Introduction** he world has been overwhelmed with complex issues. Thus, exploring social issues in literary works became necessary so as to inform the people of social issues ingrained in their locales. These issues, of course, are realistic in the society and it is delightful to create fictive worlds for their representations. On this note, contemporary writers use their literary works to question the follies, foibles or atrocities that are prevalent in their society. That is why these issues, as crafted in literary texts, make them lachrymatory. It is no doubt that contemporary writers continue to expose the malaises in their respective



societies. In this vein, this article sets out to reveal how writers use their ingenuity to create the upheavals in their individual society.

Remarkably, contemporary African writers such as Mukoma wa Ngugi, Eghosa Imasuen, Lola Akande, Lola Shoneyin, Chimamanda Adichie, Helon Habila, NoViolet Bulawayo and many others have contributed immensely to exploring contemporary issues in their literary works. Some of these social issues include: poverty, disorderliness, political issues, corruption, transnational violence and racial discrimination, etc. These writers have saddled themselves with the responsibility of capturing societal problems in fictive realms. The topics examined in this essay are fictitious, yet they are still current challenges in many countries.

In *Nairobi Heat* by Mukoma wa Ngugi, the challenges of the present are critically examined. For instance, common societal problems are highlighted in this novel. Also, it is crucial to note that these writers are acting as town criers by informing the general public about crises that live with them. In their broad strokes, these writings cover a wide range of societal topics. The writer is a prime example of this group in terms of their creative output; he reflects society in his works and challenges the readers' perceptions in order to make judgements having read a literary work. Therefore, this essay will examine how Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat* depicts social realities in order to provide remedies for these underlying social problems.

## Literature Review

Works have examined social issues across different countries in Africa. Some of such works will be explored in this piece to justify this new study.

Paul Liam in his study *Nairobi Heat: A Juxtaposition of Race and Crime*, explains how literature continues to influence discussion on human issues and their impacts on the society. He asserts the usefulness of literature to scrutinise the conditions of human existence which results in re-evaluating the consciousness of one to pay attention to plethora of happenings around. For instance, he examines one of the inherent issues in the world, which is the issue of racial prejudice (racism). Of course, the society is riddled with mammoth issues as a result of human errors and complicities. As noted above, human issues as portrayed in literary texts are not for fancy, they are subtly represented to inform readers of probable realities as they exist in the cosmos.

In *Gender and Race Matter: Global Perspectives on Being a Woman*, Davies surveys the trend in African literature as being projected by younger generation, who have changed the narratives from writing back to the colonial empire. Their foci are on the existing societal issues such as: issues of migration, consequences of living in the diaspora, corruption, bad governance and other critical issues. He argues that African writers have had contacts or experiences before writing, and are engaging a range of issues that are no

longer identical to those concerning writers of the immediate colonial experience. To rightly put it, social issues in today's society are corruption, insecurity, sexuality, migration and post-independence challenges and these are prominently articulated in literary texts.

This contrasts the themes and explorations of the older generation of African writers such as: Isidore Okpewho, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, etc., while the current generation, especially Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Mukoma Wa Ngugi embrace contemporariness.

Rakshanehnia et al. in *Sociological Criticism of the Novel: Abdul Motajali's Confessions* by Najib Al-Kilani, examines the co-existence between literature, society and relationship; it is established that literature mirrors the society and it has been exploring social happenings, specifically social maladies which include: poverty, corruption and lack of injustice. In this wise, these scholars show the thematic consciousness of African writers who focused on exposing the common issues in their immediate societies. As noted above, Najib Al-Kilani is one of the recent Egyptian novelists who have skilfully represented the anomalies in the society in his book. This act is to ensure his readers are informed of the realities prototypically represented in literary works.

Again, Wanjohi's *Narrating Transnational Violence and Crime* in Mukoma wa Ngugi's Novels, uses this study to investigate "the issues of transnational violence and crime as imperceptibly addressed by Mukoma in *Nairobi Heat* and *Black Star Nairobi*" (18). He argues that Mukoma sets out to inform the people of issues that continue to ravage the world and it is of importance for writers of literature to address them. Also, he suggests the need for literary writers to address these issues; he critically examines these issues through harvesting other thematic concerns. In his analysis of these texts, he harvests themes such as betrayal, corruption, racism, greed and deception.

It is important to note that issues being addressed by writers have shifted from the domain of old generation writers to a new crop of writers who are particular about present issues that are affecting their countries.

### **Theoretical Inclination**

This study will be anchored on Kenneth Burke's theory of sociological criticism to tease out the social realities entrenched in Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Nairobi Heat*. In this wise, literature is one of the many sources that sociology, which is the science of social connections, uses to study society. Literature, as a social product, represents human society, human relationships, and the environment in which we exist, engage in activity, and move. Similar to sociological criticism, literature analyses the realistic portrayal of human existence critically. It is thus seen as the society's mirror and controller. This

is why Shelby et al., put it that the goal of sociological criticism is to understand how social interactions are impacted by literary truths. In this context, sociological criticism focuses on the assessment of literature in the culture, economic, and political context in which it is written or received.

Moving on, this research has its foundation on the sociological criticism of literature. This criticism poses to analysing social context of a literary work through examining an author's society to better understanding the author's text. This submission is what Shelby et al., noted by saying sociological criticism has a social impact that deals with real life situations and gives a totally different point of view of how to perceive society.

Sociological criticism places a literary work in its sociocultural setting. Olorunleke and Ladele stress that social criticism is a method of criticism which situates a literary work within its sociological setting. Since a literary construct is constantly influenced by its surroundings, it establishes a connection between a literary work and its society. Because of this, a literary work is seen as a "sociological document" that might reveal details about the culture that inspired it. As a result, it emphasises how a literary construct is constantly influenced by its surroundings and explores the link between a literary work and its society.

In this regard, so many novels have been examined using sociological criticism. Thus, Karimian et al. adopt sociological approach to examine the discourse and image of men and women in the famous Bozorg Alavi's *Her Eyes*. Alavi realistically portrays real happenings and exposes the inadequacies of the society of his time. This novel is a sociopolitical creation and its characterisation represents sociopolitical ideologies. Of course, the focus of Alavi in his novel is to critically expose the social issues in the text arising from characters' actions so as to understand them through their speech and to be aware of how society operates in the system of dialogue. One of the critical issues examined in this novel is the place and representation of women which contradict their beings.

Also, Mahoozi et al. observe that sociological criticism is an appropriate method of analyzing literary works, including realistic novels, which studies and examines different classes of society, different behaviours, attitudes, practices and actions in the social structure within temporal and spatial periods (265-289). In Zahra's *Ala Maedat ul-Da'ish*, Mahoozi et al. note that these issues including captivated women's rights, cultural poverty, patriarchy, social disorders with disguise of Islam by men in ISIS. Notably, it addresses issues of dehumanisation, marginalisation and ostracisation of women in Iraq. With sociological criticism, the nature of society is being assessed via the purpose and impact being of women captured by ISIS, and the impact of the social, political and cultural situations of that time and place on the characters and events of the story (265-289).

Hasibuan et al. use sociological criticism to examine *Konspirasi Alam Semesta* a novel by Fiersa Besari. It is construed that the writer satirises social conditions that linger in Indonesia. With the deployment of sociological analysis of the text, these issues are extracted: discrimination against families of ex- political prisoner, government policies towards those who have made the country proud, Papua's wealth and injustice in the development of remote areas, moral criticism of corruption, social criticism of humanity such as generalizations about a group, individual differences, violence against separatists and stigma about spinster, religion / belief about the creator, etc.

These scholars were able to explore degrading societal issues using sociological criticism to reflect social realities in selected literary works. This reveals that sociological criticism is a useful theory to exploring social conditions subtly engraved in literary texts.

### **Synopsis of Text and Analysis**

A young American girl's body is discovered on the porch of an African professor's home in the American suburb of Madison, Wisconsin. Mukoma Wa Ngugi uses the theory that every narrative has a narrator and every narrator has a narrative point of view to tell the tale of African American detective Ishmael Fofona, who travels to Nairobi to solve the case. Ishmael's presence in Nairobi creates a connection with David Odhiambo, sometimes known as O, a Kenyan detective who works for the Criminal Investigation Department. However, since the investigators are unable to identify the dead female, the duo finds the "murder case" complicated. Ishmael had taken a call from an unknown number in Nairobi requesting him to get there in order to discover the truth. The detective gets that African scholar Joshua Hakizimana participated in the 1994 Rwandan genocide as he moves throughout the city and its surroundings.

These detectives have challenges as they attempt to pursue clues that lead to the murder because of the quest motif, and sometimes their safety is not assured. They react violently to many attempts to exterminate of their quest. Ishmael had grown to be a pain in the side of the dishonest individuals running the Never Again Foundation, a group that brings together contributors with the intention of generating money for relief to the Rwandan refugees. The foundation is really a mechanism for exploitation, meant to benefit syndicate members. Many of the refugees, including the managers of the Kokomat shop, are bribed to remain silent about the part Professor Hazikimana played in the genocide's mass killing of Rwandese.

When Detective Ishmael is being dragged out of the country to indict Joshua Hakizimana with the murder case, he and O encounter a goddess during their investigation. Muddy, a girl of Rwandan descent is attacked as they go to the airport. O and Muddy adjust their plans in response to the

assault, which results in the killing of the attackers, and suggest that Ishmael go to Uganda. Ishmael learns the identity of the deceased American girl when they arrive at Butere, a village in western Kenya. Macy Jane Admanzah is the woman. Ishmael has more information on the Admanzah family, who were Rwandan missionaries at the time of the genocide.

The protagonist of a quest narrative is always given what they are willing to have rather than what they are seeking. In the middle of an assault on him, Ishmael ultimately returns to America and fits together the facts, which prompts him to kill the attackers. Before Ishmael shoots the attack's commander Chocbanc dead, he reveals important revelations concerning the exploitative operations of the Never Again Foundation. As Joshua Hakizimana was covertly getting ready to go to Paris, Ishmael went on to kill James Wellstone, the head of the KKK militia. Ishmael instantly kills the KKK thugs accompanying Wellstone before approaching him and shooting him dead as he exits Joshua's room. Ishmael discovers Joshua inside the home, where he is on his deathbed and Mary Jane Adamanzah has received justice.

## **Thematic Preoccupations**

### **Quest for truth and identity**

In *Nairobi Heat*, Mukoma Wa Ngugi through the lens of sociological criticism promotes this theme symbolically since it is a major problem mulatto face while in Europe. Their identity has been lost as a result of slavery. It can be said that slavery is harmful to the equality of races. Those who have lost their identity find themselves on the quest of switching their reputation as wanderers and discovering where they genuinely belong. In this book, Ishmael, a victim of misplaced identity, faces his heritage in the hopes of rediscovering his identity and being able to see Africa from an African lens rather than the stereotypical lens.

Lynder Christine puts it that Ishmael's real problem is the desire to also want to control his own decisions and behaviours without worrying about the white man's penalty or opinion to define him not with the stereotyped tags (99). The tragedy of the whole identity search is that the African-American's quest for identity began over the things for which he himself is not responsible for; his black colour, his race, his ancestors and even his physic.

Mukoma uses the blonde girl, Macy Admanzah as bait to guide Ishmael into the search for his ancestry bearing in mind that the prime suspect in this case of murder is in fact black from Africa. Ishmael receives a call from a caller that says: "If you want the truth, you must go to its source. The truth is in the past. Come to Nairobi." (p18)

It is crucial to note that, to answer the question "who am I," Ishmael gently reveals to us whether he intends to look for Joshua's history or if he is truly

on this trip to reunite with his own past. Ishmael, however, is truly travelling to his birthplace in search of his history.

Therefore, *Nairobi Heat* through sociological criticism x-rays the inherent issue of quest for identity with blacks in America is evidently addressed. This quest of identity has brought many challenges and dangers to Ishmael, the mulatto detective who uses Joshua Hakizimana's case as an avenue to search for his identity.

The narrator questions himself to really not feel unperturbed, having considered much of Africa as a part of him. A cursory look at the brief biography below will explain that the narrator himself is not rooted or grounded with the happenings in Africa:

How many times had I thought Africa? Not many, I'm afraid. Yes I know of Africa. After all it was the land of my ancestors; a place I vaguely longed for without really wanting to belong to it. From the U.S there was a part of me that had come to believe it was a land of wars, hunger, disease and dirt even as my skin pulled me towards it. So how many times had I thought of Africa? Not many, not in a real way.'

*Nairobi Heat* raises the awareness of modern authors to maintain the realities of the past as a bridge to the future. The protagonist is more interested in resolving his identity crisis and being comfortable in his natural skin as an African than solving the murder case, although unknowingly. Additionally, the protagonist carries a heavy burden of identity as he is constantly reminded of his race and the hypocrisy of white towards black heroes who are never given the opportunity to succeed in the first place; as a result, any act of bravery by a black man is seen by white as a miracle.

### **Corruption**

It is no doubt that corruption is a common social issue. On this topical issue, Mukoma espouses the collaboration between Africans and Americans for manipulative reasons. He exposes the socio political-cum-economic maladies that persevere in the society. Mukoma's positions in the text are symbolical as he uses the death of the blonde girl as bait to expose this societal ill. Corruption contributes to transnational violence in the work, whereas all countries are victims of this evil perpetrated. In the news, social media, journals and articles, the complaints of corruption is alarming in the world.

As a social reality, through sociological criticism of the novel, it is evident that Africans have been perpetually deceived by white; they blindfold the subaltern by concocting lies or deceiving them with their developed economies of which they manipulate Africa to get things work for them. African leaders are usually collaborating with the western world to twist the people and embezzle the country's wealth. For instance, the use of satire can be found in the exploitative conglomeration of Joshua and Alexander who use

the foundation that is built for philanthropic practices as a means of exploitation. This foundation is built to cater for the refugees affected by genocide, but this fund is diverted. The bourgeoisie, that is, companies like Shell, the Kokomat women and also, the supposedly philanthropists have used the money for supports to cater for themselves. This brings us to Marxist criticism which is influenced by sociological criticism; the former deconstructs the concept of capitalism and submit to encouraging socialism. We can absolutely say that Mukoma delves into the society's archive to emphasise unending problem of corruption in every society and he lampoons this corruptive malady.

The issue of corruption is a societal problem and it is continuously questioned by contemporary writers. The fictionalisation of this issue can be measured with its equivalent contemporary realities in the society.

### **Racism**

Amongst many issues explored by Wa Ngugi, he examines racism as a lingering social issue. The text itself is woven under racial undertones. It is evident on the front page that, "A beautiful young blonde was dead, and the suspect, my suspect, was an African male, I was travelling to Africa in search of his past..." This connotes that a white girl has been killed. Ishmael says:

If I was to give advice to black criminals, I would tell them this: do not commit crimes against white people because the state will not rest until you are caught. I mean, if a crime is not solved within the first 48 hours it has all but of facially gone cold. But a black-on-white crime does not go cold (4).

This position of Ishmael explains how racism is being taken seriously by Europeans and it is highly necessary to investigate who the murderer is. Ishmael travels to Africa going through missions to unravel the murder misery. Racial discrimination or racism has been in existence a long time ago. It is believed black people are inferior to other race. Mukoma uses *Nairobi Heat* to question the deceptive relationship between African countries and European nations. These countries, however, discriminate against the black people and this is a social concern. As a way of exposing this ill, Mukoma uses the character of Chief Jackson Jordan metaphorically as he is confused and under pressure to ensure that this case of murder is resolved to the satisfaction of his masters.

It is apparent that some Europeans promote racial discrimination of which Thompson is one of them. He detests the involvement of black people in doing things in the world. He believes that black people are subjected to the control of white. Also, Alexander does not care about the lives of the black people. He prefers making money during the genocide and the black people should keep dying for his own personal gain.



Mukoma deliberately brings Ku Klux Klan (KKK militia) into this text to further explain the perpetual racial discrimination. Everywhere in the world, black people suffer from this inherent barbarism of their white counterparts. Mukoma involves the presence of Langston Hughes's poem and these lines are metaphorical as they demonstrate the racial discrimination undertones, Ishmael says:

I remembered a Langston Hughes poem that we had memorized in elementary school: what happens to a dream deferred? I started. Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore, or crust and sugar over, like a heavy load. Or does it explode? (112)

Mukoma reminds the black people in the contemporary society not to forget the heroes past: Rosa Parks, Martin Luther king, Jr. Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Ida B. Wells and so on, who fought and advocated for liberation of black race. Today, Africans have adopted measures to resisting racial discrimination. The character of Wellstone typifies KKK militia movement.

Ishmael let us know that:

The KKK, led by a nasty-looking little man called James Wellstone, began mobilizing its members from outlying farming turns to march across Madison and, according to their more radical members, lynch him (14).

And again, Joshua reveals the hypocrisy and constructed hegemony of white over black. This is a result of racism. In Africa, black people do not discriminate against the white Joshua says:

I go to Kenya and see Kikuyu and Luo live together. I come to America and see black and white live together. I grow but what I know then? Look, Ishmael, life was simple. I teach them, I live with them, but what they do for me? They take best jobs, fuck my women and take my best land..." (104)

The issue of racism has become an interminable social issue as many social critics have advocated for its end.

### **Bad governance**

Through sociological criticism, it is deduced that Mukoma craftily writes *Nairobi Heat* to satirize the government institution who neglected their duty of developing and fixing appropriately the affairs of the country. Ishmael speaks about the bad roads when he comes to Africa. This issue is a contemporary reality whereby money allocated to fix roads is being embezzled by the government. The government divert their attentions from the things ultimately needed by the citizens and this attitude leads to lack of standard roads, healthcare facilities and agric.

Fofona reveals:

We drove for a while without excited at the same time, but out of the million little curiosities that clouded my mind I could think of nothing to ask, so I listened to O as



he hummed a Kenny Rogers song. “The gambler” which he in tempted every now and then with curses as we dipped in and out of the potholes that littered the road (3).

Africans in the Diaspora do not find it interesting to come to Africa. They believed Africa is not a good place to be. Those who have gone there always return with bad news. This shows the inadequacies of the government in African societies at large. They do not create avenue to compete with global countries that they have resources much more than. When Ishmael is compelled to come to Africa in search of the truth, he says:

How many times had I thought of Africa? Not many, I’m afraid yes. I knew Africa. After all it was the land of my ancestors; a place I vaguely longed for without really wanting to belong to it I might as well say it here. Coming from the US there was a part of me that had come to believe it was a land of wars, hunger, disease and dirt even as my skin pulled me towards it. So how many times had I thought of Africa? Not many not in a real way (1).

He believes in crises that are happening in Africa and they include: war, hunger, disease and dirt as they are contemporary social issues. Mukoma fictionalises these realistic issues to provoke the consciousness of Africans.

### **Breeding of hoodlums and the alarming issue of rape**

Mukoma takes his time to explore contemporary issues that tend to be alarming in the society. On the one hand, the novel reveals the nature of hoodlums which is to destroy and tamper with peaceful co-existence of the society. On the other hand, rape in Africa has taken a different dimension as authorities have created ways to deal with its perpetrators. These issues of hoodlums and rape are evident when Ishmael and Odhiambo are going through the shacks:

He stopped immediately and rolled off the girl, trying desperately to pull up his pants and put up his hands at the same time. O came in, and without asking any questions knocked the man to the ground and handcuffed him. Meanwhile the girl, in a white-and-red school uniform, had rolled down her skirt and was desperately trying to button her torn blouse. Are you learning English in school? (24)

This is not to say that only hoodlums perpetrate the act of raping, but hoodlums form a large body of this group of rapists. Another experience of hoodlum affairs occurs when Odhiambo and Ishmael are combating some people who have AK47s. In the society, for instance, Africa, politicians or governments breed some group of people to cause chaos. These hoodlums are deliberately used by bourgeoisie for electioneering evil. Mukoma calls attention of the state to combat such gathering which sometimes transform into insurgent group. Ishmael and Odhiambo’s encounter with the things:

... As the rapist lurched forward I turned and pushed Janet down so that we both fell to the earth. I rolled onto my back, and while still on the ground I aimed for a split second and fired, aimed again and fired again. Two of the young men flailed in the

mused either, and only their leader managed to get couple of around us harmlessly, before O dropped him too (26).

These social issues identified have become problem plaguing countries. Mukoma has not done mistake by fictionalising these issues in the fictive world of *Nairobi Heat*.

## Conclusion

In this study, the sociological criticism of *Nairobi Heat* by Mukoma Wa Ngugi has been thoroughly examined through identifying the themes that are evident social problems. *Nairobi Heat* has rendered itself useful as it serves as a portmanteau of decipherability that has in social palavers.

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