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CHESS AS A LIFE METAPHOR IN KINYANJUI KOMBANI'S OF PAWNS AND PLAYERS

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Abstract

*This study explored the literary concerns of third-generation Kenyan authors, positioning them as a thematic shift from first- and second-generation writers. Whereas earlier generations largely emphasized corruption, postcolonial disillusionment, and stalled national development, this research examined how contemporary authors articulate the evolving notion of Kenyan nationhood. The study was inspired by the limited critical attention given to this emerging literary generation, whose works capture Kenya's shifting political, cultural, and social realities. The analysis focused on three texts: *Of Pawns and Players* (2018) by Kinyanjui Kombani, *Nairobi Heat* (2009) by Mukoma wa Ngugi, and *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. It investigated how these writers depict contemporary Kenyan issues, the role of language in engaging the nation, and the narrative techniques employed to represent the complexities of national identity. The research was guided by three questions: What issues are addressed in the texts? How is language used to address the Kenyan nation? Which narrative techniques are employed in narrating the nation? Drawing on narratology as the theoretical framework, particularly the works of Roland Barthes and Gerald Prince, the study applied a qualitative methodology. Primary data was drawn from the novels, supplemented by secondary data from critical literature on Kenya's socio-political landscape. Content analysis revealed that the selected authors foreground pressing issues such as identity crises, systemic crime and corruption, shifting gender dynamics, and the impact of technology and social media on public discourse. These themes were interwoven into the narratives in ways that highlight a nuanced, globalized, and intersectional vision of the Kenyan nation. Rather than presenting the state as fixed or monolithic, the authors depict it as contested and fluid, shaped by historical memory, diasporic influence, and everyday struggles. Language was shown to blend multiple registers that reflect class divisions, urban speech patterns, and Kenya's multilingual reality. The findings contribute to literary scholarship by mapping the changing contours of Kenyan fiction and demonstrating how contemporary literature both reflects and critiques socio-political transformation. Ultimately, this study provides a reference point for future research and offers a literary lens for understanding Kenya's ongoing national conversation.*

1.1 Introduction

This paper explores how Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players* employs chess as a multifaceted metaphor to interrogate class struggle, systemic violence, and existential entrapment in urban Kenya. Drawing on comparative literary references, from Nabokov to Beckett, and theoretical frameworks by scholars such as Achille Mbembe, Pierre Bourdieu, and Olaniyan, the essay argues that Kombani's Nairobi becomes a metaphorical chessboard where survival is governed by structural inequality, not merit or justice. Characters like Toma and Elisha are likened to pawns, expendable, manipulated, and often sacrificed, while elite figures act as kings and queens who orchestrate social dynamics from positions of invisibility and impunity. Through motifs of tactical sacrifice, warlike ambush, and a rigged endgame, Kombani critiques the illusions of mobility and agency under neoliberal capitalism and a postcolonial state apparatus that is both violent and arbitrary. Ultimately, the novel subverts traditional narratives of social ascension by portraying success as a compromised product of chance and corruption, suggesting that in Kenya's urban landscape, the rules of the game are not only opaque but fundamentally unjust.

In literature, chess often transcends its role as a game of intellect to become a powerful metaphor for life's deeper existential struggles. From personal turmoil to societal manipulation, authors have used the structured battlefield of the chessboard to mirror the psychological, social, and philosophical dimensions of human experience.

In Walter Tevis' *The Queen's Gambit*, chess becomes protagonist Beth Harmon's lifeline; an island of order in a sea of personal loss, addiction, and loneliness. Each game is a symbolic assertion of control over a disordered world. The rigid rules and predictable consequences of chess moves contrast sharply with Beth's chaotic life, allowing her a space of mastery and expression. The metaphor extends to her identity formation; as she rises through the ranks of international competition, the board becomes the terrain upon which she negotiates her genius and her trauma.

For Luzhin, Vladimir Nabokov's protagonist in *The Luzhin Defense*, chess is no a refuge but rather a labyrinth. The game alienates him from reality and ultimately leads to psychological collapse. The author uses metaphor of the chess game to explore how obsession can consume identity and blur boundaries between logic and madness. The brilliance of Luzhin's mind becomes his downfall, suggesting that the pursuit of perfection or control, symbolized by the infinite possibilities of chess, can paradoxically lead to self-destruction.

In Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, the author presents a bleak theatrical landscape where life is reduced to an endgame scenario that is slow, inevitable, and meaningless. Characters are likened to pieces trapped in an unplayable position, waiting for the final move that will end their suffering. The chess metaphor here represents existential futility: the knowledge that all strategies lead only toward the final, unavoidable checkmate of death. The stage is the board, the characters the pawns of a silent cosmic absurdity.

Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* builds on the structure of a chess game, with Alice, the protagonist, starting as a pawn and progressing to queen. This whimsical framework becomes a metaphor for maturation, logic, and the navigation of arbitrary societal rules. The absurdity of the chess world mirrors the

contradictions of adulthood, where advancement often seems more about chance and performance than innate worth.

1.2 Structural parallels to war

In *Of Pawns and Players*, Kinyanjui Kombani constructs a literary metaphor that maps urban life onto the structure of a chessboard, transforming Nairobi's chaotic streets into a strategic war zone where class, mobility, and survival are continuously negotiated. Much like a battlefield or a chess game, the novel's urban space functions as a constrained arena of confrontation, in which the marginalized, represented by characters like Toma, Elisha, and Josh, must navigate danger, unpredictability, and systemic oppression. This critical essay explores how Kombani draws structural parallels between chess, war, and city life, using the metaphor to critique economic disparity and state complicity.

At the heart of this parallel lies the 8x8 structure of the chessboard, a grid that creates the illusion of order and rules. In contrast, the Kenyan cityscape depicted in the novel is chaotic, lawless, and arbitrary, yet strategic logic still governs the survival of its inhabitants. Kombani seems to suggest that while the board may not be visible, the moves are real. The poor are reduced to pawns, "expendable foot soldiers", who are pushed forward in hope, yet often sacrificed in pursuit of the powerful's agendas. This aligns with Mbembe's (2001) notion of the postcolonial African state as a site of "arbitrary violence and spectral power," where formal structures veil informal manipulations.

In this urban war, class functions like rank in military hierarchies or chess pieces. The city council askaris and policemen, analogous to cavalry units like knights and rooks, are not sovereign agents but are deployed by invisible kings: politicians, betting bosses like Mr. Walaki, and financial elites. Their brutality enforces control rather than justice. Kombani exposes this systemic chain of command, suggesting that while the askaris act with violence, they themselves are constrained by orders. The city thus becomes a layered battleground where every player is either a tool or a target.

The pawn-to-power arc is most vividly symbolized in Toma's transformation from a mutura vendor to a sudden millionaire through betting, a moment of improbable ascension akin to a pawn reaching the back rank and achieving promotion. This progression mirrors a soldier's battlefield glory, but Kombani complicates the ideal by making the source of victory ethically ambiguous. Toma's wealth does not arise from merit or revolution, but through chance, desperation, and a corrupted betting system, a war economy, of sorts, that profits the powerful while offering occasional wins to placate the masses. As Ogude (2011) notes in his study of third-generation Kenyan writers, this generation often portrays social mobility as a "gamble within neoliberal decay," where hope itself becomes commodified.

Moreover, Kombani's characters live in constant anticipation of attack, much like in wartime. Toma's beating in the opening chapter is sudden and unprovoked a surprise assault, not unlike an ambush in guerrilla warfare or a tactical opening in chess. His body becomes the terrain upon which power is violently expressed. Kombani blurs the line between civic life and war, suggesting that for the urban poor, the state's presence is felt not in governance, but in force a situation Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) likens to colonial continuities in post-independence African societies.

Finally, the novel's title, *Of Pawns and Players*, echoes the war metaphor explicitly. "Players" are those in control kings and strategists who move pieces to their advantage while "pawns" are those moved. Kombani thus lays bare a warfare of class,

orchestrated through economic systems, urban policing, and socio-political structures. Yet, in Toma's improbable escape with the betting winnings, the novel allows for a subversion of this war's logic, echoing the unpredictability of chess where a humble pawn, through patience and survival, might one day become a queen.

1.3 Strategic combat and sacrifice

Chess requires tactical depth just like in real warfare demanding foresight, planning and deception, and sacrifices are often necessary to gain positional advantage or ultimate victory. Toma, the protagonist in Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players*, held a strong stance against betting but finally makes a sacrifice and accepts to play along with *Waziri's* charade with the getting to keep the money and get out of poverty which is his ultimate goal.

Chess, just like war, has three phases, the opening where mobilisation takes place, the middlegame where there is combat and positioning and finally, the endgame where there is the final conquest or defense.

Kombani's opening chapter is structured like a sudden, brutal chess attack. The novel opens with the interjection "Smack!" referring to the unexpected blow Toma receives from the attackers in a Mercedes Benz. This can be likened to a first-move gambit or tactical ambush. Just like a pawn is sacrificed early in a gambit, Toma is thrown into a conflict without understanding why. This is symbolic of one sacrificed on the board of larger invisible power plays. The chess parallel in this case is Toma is a pawn struck without warning, much like a surprise sacrifice meant to gain positional dominance.

In many societies, economic systems are structured in ways that allow the wealthy to maintain and extend their dominance by exploiting the vulnerabilities of the poor, often a pattern that mirrors the logic of a chess game in which pawns are sacrificed to secure strategic advantage. In Kinyanjui Kombani's *Of Pawns and Players*, this metaphor is dramatized through the lives of characters like Toma and Elisha, whose poverty makes them susceptible to manipulation and systemic violence. Elisha's addiction to betting and his resulting losses reflect a broader pattern in which the poor are lured into high-risk systems that disproportionately benefit the powerful. As the poor gamble with what little they have, the rich often represented by shadowy corporate interests, politicians, and enforcers, reap the profits.

This dynamic resonates with theories of structural inequality advanced by scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, who argues that systems of symbolic and economic capital are designed to reproduce the dominance of the elite (Bourdieu, 1986). The betting economy in Kombani's novel acts as a tool of symbolic violence, seducing individuals like Elisha into believing in upward mobility while actually reinforcing their marginalization. As Kombani shows, this is not merely incidental but part of a deliberate strategy: the poor are expendable pawns in a game orchestrated by powerful players whose wealth insulates them from risk and legal consequence.

Critics like Olaniyan (2004) have similarly examined how African popular culture and urban narratives often reveal the "theatricality of power", where spectacle and illusion conceal the mechanics of domination. In *Of Pawns and Players*, the spectacle of wealth, epitomized by the man in the Mercedes Benz and his brutal bodyguards, serves to intimidate and control. Toma's humiliation is public and theatrical, meant not only to punish but to send a

message that the rules of the game are rigged, and the poor cannot win.

In this way, Kombani's novel does more than critique individual choices; it exposes a systemic reality where the structures of power are designed to ensure that the poor remain movable and expendable, like pawns, while the rich consolidate their positional advantage, move by calculated move.

1.4 Power imbalance in the King versus Pawn Dynamic

The novel's opening where an attacker emerging from a Mercedes Benz to attack a humble *mutura* vendor functions not only as a narrative hook but also a potent metaphor for state-sanctioned imbalance of power. The Mercedes Benz, a symbol of wealth and authority contrasts starkly with Toma's fragile economic position, mirroring hierarchical relations that can be likened to that of a King and a Pawn. The bodyguards, policemen and city council *askaris* sent to harass the traders function like rooks and knights; pieces controlled by a more powerful figure who remains behind the scenes. The powerful figures include Mr Walaki, the owner of MoneyBet, the betting firm. Toma, a pawn, is therefore surrounded and controlled by higher-value pieces on a chessboard that he does not understand.

This stark contrast reflects what Mbembe (2001) identifies as the "commandement" of the postcolonial African state, a regime of visibility and invisibility where power is both overt and opaque. The man in the Mercedes, flanked by bodyguards and wielding impunity, performs violence not just against Toma but against the entire class he represents. His actions signal a broader system in which state violence and corporate interests intersect, often to the detriment of the urban poor.

In this schema, the city *askaris*, police officers, and enforcers resemble the rooks and knights of a chessboard: powerful yet subordinate pieces enacting the will of unseen kings—corporate elites like Mr. Walaki, the owner of MoneyBet, and corrupt state actors. As Toma is beaten and dragged into the car, his lack of agency reinforces what Bourdieu (1986) would call the internalization of symbolic violence: he accepts the rules of the game, despite knowing they are stacked against him. This dramatization of passivity and fear mirrors the experiences of many Kenyans navigating a state that, rather than protecting its citizens, too often colludes with private capital to extract, humiliate, and dominate.

Kombani's urban Nairobi, particularly the fictionalized space of Kiamatawa (ironically named "City of Lights" despite its darkness and dysfunction), becomes a chessboard on which the poor can only move one square at a time, tentatively, hesitantly, while the rich make sweeping moves, unchecked and unchallenged. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) has long argued, postcolonial Kenyan society suffers from a continuation of colonial structures that alienate the common citizen. Kombani's Toma is not just a victim of class disparity; he is a symbol of how the state and its institutions operate as instruments of elite preservation, sacrificing pawns to maintain the illusion of progress and order.

The broader metaphor here also speaks to the illusion of agency in democratic societies where the poor are encouraged to participate (e.g., through betting, elections, or informal economies), yet their choices are predetermined by structures of power. Olaniyan (2004) emphasizes how African urban narratives often showcase this

“theatricality of power,” where spectacle disguises deeper oppression. In Kombani’s novel, the spectacle of violence, wealth, and betting culture serves not only to entertain but to condition citizens into accepting their place on the board.

Of Pawns and Players uses the familiar structure of chess to critique the power dynamics between the Kenyan state, corporate actors, and the urban poor. The King-vs.-Pawn metaphor is not just rhetorical; it reveals how the poor are systematically positioned to lose, sacrificed at the altar of profit, governance, and elite security. Kombani’s narrative urges readers to see beyond the game to question who controls the board, and at what cost.

1.5 Urban Chaos and the State in Third-Generation Kenyan Writing: The Chessboard Without Rules

Third-generation Kenyan writers like Kinyanjui Kombani have emerged with a sharp, urban sensibility that captures the fragmented and volatile relationship between the citizen and the postcolonial state. In *Of Pawns and Players*, the state is not a coherent institution but a dispersed, unpredictable force — at times violent, at other times indifferent — reflecting what Wainaina (2010) terms a “non-linear, rhizomatic authority” in African megacities. This chaotic structure mirrors a middle-game position in chess where the player lacks clear strategy, vision, or understanding of the opponent’s long-term intentions. For Toma, the protagonist, the attack comes suddenly and without explanation. He scrambles to interpret the assault, assuming it’s a case of “*kanjo*” (city askaris) or a bribe gone wrong but like an inexperienced player caught in a complex game, he is always a move behind.

This lack of clarity reflects a deeper critique of the Kenyan state’s erosion of legal and ethical predictability. Kombani’s cityscape, Kiamatawa, operates in a moral grey zone where power flows not through institutions but through spectacle, intimidation, and surveillance. The absence of clear rules, coupled with the protagonist’s limited understanding of the larger game, creates an urban atmosphere akin to strategic disorientation, a condition frequently explored by third-generation writers like Meja Mwangi, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and Mukoma wa Ngugi. These authors confront how neoliberalism, corruption, and urban inequality dismantle the idea of a state accountable to its citizens. The citizen, like a chess pawn, must navigate unpredictability without knowledge of who the opponent is or what the next attack might be.

As Mbembe (2001) argues, the postcolonial state often asserts itself through arbitrariness rather than order, and Kombani renders this vividly. Toma’s desperate attempt to interpret his attackers’ motives, even as he is being dragged into a car, dramatizes the lived experience of many urban poor in Kenya who suffer under a state that is visible only through its violence and absent in its protection. Thus, *Of Pawns and Players* is not just a story about class struggle; it is a literary reenactment of a strategic game without rules, where the powerful move like queens and knights, while the poor stumble, guess, and hope not to be sacrificed.

1.6 The “Hard-Small” Dilemma as Zugzwang: State Entrapment in Third-Generation Kenyan Fiction

In *Of Pawns and Players*, Kinyanjui Kombani uses Toma’s sense of being “in a hard-small,” caught between a rock and a hard place,

to dramatize a classic chess scenario: zugzwang, where every move a player makes worsens their position. For Toma, passivity is not cowardice but a survival strategy; he is acutely aware that resistance, like a poor move in chess, would only accelerate his downfall. This mirrors what Mbembe (2001) calls the “commandement” of the postcolonial state, a regime not defined by rules and institutions, but by unpredictability, coercion, and fear. The third-generation Kenyan novel, particularly in urban settings, reflects this condition of entrapment and moral compromise. As Ogude (2011) observes, these writers often depict the city as a contested space, where state power is experienced not through civic engagement but through surveillance, violence, and economic exclusion.

Toma’s paralysis is not just personal; it is emblematic of a broader citizen-state dynamic in contemporary Kenya, where ordinary people are hemmed in by corruption, police brutality, and exploitative economic systems (such as the betting industry depicted in the novel). Just like a pawn in zugzwang, he must keep playing a game whose logic he neither understands nor controls. Kombani’s work aligns with other third-generation writers like Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor and Mukoma wa Ngugi, who portray the state as a force that has abdicated responsibility while maintaining its grip through violent intermediaries. This literary zugzwang speaks to the lived reality of many urban poor, where political disengagement becomes the only viable option in a game rigged from the start.

1.7 Identity and Powerlessness: Dehumanization of the Pawn in the Postcolonial State

In *Of Pawns and Players*, the protagonist’s oscillation between “Thomas” and “Toma” is more than a nickname; it is a marker of the erasure of identity in a society where the state reduces individuals to disposable units. Much like a pawn on a chessboard, Toma is stripped of agency and strategic awareness, shuffled and sacrificed by larger forces, whether legal (police), economic (betting firms), or political (county power structures). His given name, “Thomas,” used only by banks, lawyers, and police, reflects the bureaucratic abstraction imposed on citizens by a system that only recognizes them when extracting value or enforcing control. “Toma,” the street identity, is a self-fashioned shield, a way to survive in the precarious urban landscape of Kiamatawa.

This dehumanization aligns with what Achille Mbembe (2001) describes as the “proliferation of death-worlds” in postcolonial African states, where certain populations are structurally excluded and made invisible unless they become useful to systems of exploitation. Scholars like Nfah-Abbenyi (2007) and Ogude (2011) have noted that third-generation African writers, unlike their predecessors, do not romanticize the nation-state. Instead, they focus on the individual’s powerlessness within increasingly predatory political economies, particularly in urban spaces. Toma, like many urban poor in contemporary Kenya, is a pawn in a vast game whose full strategy is known only to those at the top figures like Mr. Walaki, the billionaire behind the betting firm MoneyBet. The game plays on, and like a pawn, Toma’s role is to absorb risk, not to win.

Toma’s surprising ascent at the end of *Of Pawns and Players* beautifully mirrors the chess metaphor of a pawn’s promotion, a moment in the game where a seemingly weak piece reaches the final rank and is transformed into a queen (or another powerful

piece). This dramatic reversal speaks volumes both within the narrative and symbolically about social mobility, resistance, and the subversion of state power in postcolonial Kenya.

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