



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literary Theory and Criticism*

Portrayal of urbanity in *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories*

Daniel Mulwa Katiku, Charles Kebaya & Larry Ndivo

Department of Linguistics and Languages, Machakos University, Kenya

Correspondence: katikude@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The urban theme has gained significance in African literature in recent years as it represents the social, economic and cultural life of the people. Cities are all described in literature as places where hope and hardship, opportunity and exclusion, resilience and vulnerability co-exist. Although there have been a number of studies that have investigated urbanism in African literature, few have looked at how the short stories of the present-day Nairobi Kenyan represent urbanity in the everyday lives of those who live in informal settlements. In this paper explores how the selected stories make Nairobi's ghetto a lived and imagined urban space, reflecting the portrayal of urbanity in the work. The research was qualitative with descriptive research design. The target was the fifteen stories in *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories*, of which eight stories were chosen for their prominent portrayal of urban life in Nairobi's informal settlements. A textual analysis with close reading of the selected stories was used to collect data, and thematic content analysis was employed to identify and interpret recurring patterns related to urbanity. Michel de Certeau's Urban Imaginary Theory was used as a guide for the analysis. The results indicate that the selected stories exhibit a variety of characteristics of urbanity, namely temporal urban relationships, fluid interpersonal relationships and power relationships, surveillance and the atmosphere of fear, the hustler mentality, and social decay and moral dilemmas. These images show that in urban environments, social relations are precarious and fragile, power is informal, economic opportunities are uncertain, social control is pervasive, and ethical dilemmas influence daily life. The study concludes that *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories* presents Nairobi's ghetto as a more than physical space, showing how identity, relationships and values are negotiated throughout. The paper makes a significant contribution to the field of African urban literary studies by introducing the idea of the localized narrative as a means of gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of urban life today.

KEYWORDS: Urbanity, Bodii, Aesthetics, Urban, Power, Marginality, Nairobi

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Introduction

Literary writers have long taken interest in urban space, which offers environments where interactions of people with diverse social, cultural, and economic experiences occur. By means of fiction, writers depict the opportunities, challenges and conflicts that are part of daily life in urban settings. Charles Mangua, Meja Mwangi, Tony Mochama and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o are among the African writers who have captured urban life through the themes of poverty, inequality, crime, resilience and survival of the marginalized. They have shown that the city is not only a physical environment but a place where social life is mediated through processes of negotiation and contestation of identity, belonging, and presence.

Research on urban literature has revealed that cities, in general, are described as “broken” and “anomic” spaces with social inequality, alienation, and violence (Mallan, 2018). This kind of depiction can show the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty in a single city. While these viewpoints offer valuable lessons about the city, they often miss the nuance of the city as a place in which different urban spaces create unique experiences and meanings, including ghettos and informal settlements. It is therefore important that there are local stories to inform people how they experience and react to the lived experience of urban life.

The first studies or writings about urban modernity examined the transformation of urban life in Europe, like those of Charles Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin. Their idea of the flâneur focused on the rhythms and experiences of the everyday urban life experience (Keith, 2008). These views have had a profound impact on urban literary criticism and mostly European contexts and experiences are addressed while there is little engagement with African cities, in which colonial history, economic disparity and informal mechanisms of survival have engendered other forms of urbanity. This has led to a call for research to explore the representation of urban experience in African literary texts as seen through a local lens.

The city offers conflicting realities which live side by side in the same geographical area. The affluent neighbourhoods provide education, culture and social services, while informal settlements are characterized by lack of public services, lack of social support and overcrowding (Butcher & Maclean, 2011; Fol & Gallez, 2017). Yet urban people remain resilient, continually adapting to shifting social and economic circumstances and creating alternative forms of resilience and community. The contrast of these experiences enhances the complexity of urban life and offer abundant material for literary representations.

In recent years aesthetics has come to be seen as having a much broader meaning than the beauty of art, including the beauty of ordinary human experiences and everyday spatial encounters (Light & Smith, 2005). Routine activities like walking through streets, taking public transportation, informal working, and living within neighbourhoods can come to have symbolic and aesthetic value in literary texts. It presents a new way of reading the urban narrative, highlighting the potential of everyday experiences to reveal underlying social, moral and existential truths.

Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories introduces Nairobi's ghetto, not as a backdrop to the story, but as the story itself. The narratives depict the ghetto as a place of dynamic sociality in which beauty and suffering, hope and violence, and survival occur at the same time. The diverse experiences of the people living in the city are made visible, and their ability to manage challenging economic and social dynamics is demonstrated, through the lens of everyday life. The exhibition does not merely depict this ghetto as a place of suffering, but rather the elements of daily life that inform the urban experience and human interaction.

This paper therefore examines the portrayal of urbanity in *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories*. It argues that the collection constructs the ghetto as a complex urban space where everyday experiences expose the tensions between resilience and hardship, belonging and exclusion, and hope and despair. By focusing on these representations, the study contributes to discussions on African urban literature by demonstrating how localized narratives provide a nuanced understanding of contemporary urban life.

Literature

Bass highlights the opportunity to infuse African identity into urban cultural expressions. Cultural practitioners in Durban are actively shaping city life in ways that reflect the identity and urbanity of contemporary Africa (Bass, 125). This observation suggests that urban cultural revival can emerge naturally, resulting in a diverse and transformed African urban landscape. Such insights are valuable for policymakers, as they suggest the potential for innovative approaches to revitalizing postcolonial African cities and expanding our comprehension of them.

Bass points out how urban culture in African cities is always changing, and there's a chance for cities to naturally change over time (Bass, 147). Yet, his emphasis on the potential of cultural revival overlooks how literature itself becomes a site where urban identity is debated and re-imagined, especially through everyday struggles represented in stories.

Bass further explores Durban, a city on South Africa's east coast, in the context of layered and intricate meanings. The scholar examines how identity and urbanity intertwine, presenting Durban as a space rich with historical and cultural significance. The study highlights Durban's pre-colonial history and its impact on urban development and cultural memory. Furthermore, it suggests that contemporary efforts to shape Durban through arts and culture are rooted in a long-standing tradition of inclusivity. While valuable, this argument remains heavily place-bound, privileging Durban as a central case study. It leaves unaddressed how other African urban centres, such as Nairobi, use aesthetic and cultural forms, particularly literature, to depict and contest urban experience. This gap creates the need to examine the literary portrayal of urbanity as a means of making sense of shifting city spaces.

While examining Yvone Owuor's "Weight of Whispers", Esadia shows how the novel portrays the city primarily through the interactions of its characters with its residents, rather than through descriptions of its sounds, atmosphere, or buildings. By contrasting civilization and wilderness, the author compares Nairobi to other places visited by the royal family. Nairobi is depicted as a wilderness, reminiscent of the traditional jungle trope often seen in urban literature. The untamed nature of the city is evident in the rudeness displayed by its inhabitants. While Esadia's reading illuminates one aspect of Nairobi's representation, it tends to reduce the city to a wilderness trope. These risks flattening its complexity and neglects the layered survival strategies, contradictions, and negotiations that define urban life.

Guma explores the urban lifestyle as a means of survival, particularly in southern cities influenced by postcolonial and neo-liberal development trends. These cities, including Nairobi in eastern Africa, face various challenges such as global pandemics, digital threats, and climate crises, which affect all residents (Guma, 275). This has led to the decimation of the middle class, widening the gap between elites and the masses, and increasing the cost of living for urban dwellers. In such circumstances, navigating daily life becomes synonymous with survival, requiring proactive engagement with the city as residents continuously shape their urban environment. Guma's study shows how people in cities play an active role in shaping urban life and how survival in cities is ongoing and focused on fixing problems. The study highlights the need to understand city life and how city communities stay strong.

Mupotsa, Moji, and Himmelman examine the numerous dimensions of African urbanity as portrayed in cinematic representations. They explore the affective, aesthetic, and material aspects of African visuality, spatiality, and temporality within the context of the African city. The articles examine various genres to unravel the histories, citizenships, and sexualities that shape cinematic depictions of cities like Nairobi, Luanda, Johannesburg, and Cape Town, while also reflecting on the erasure of the African city in Hollywood cinema. While cinema provides one medium for exploring African urbanity, it cannot fully capture the narrative depth and linguistic strategies embedded in literary texts. This limitation underscores the need to explore how literature, particularly short stories, offers alternative ways of representing urban complexity.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design within a qualitative research approach to examine the portrayal of urbanity in *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories*. The target population comprised the 15 short stories in the anthology. Purposive sampling was used to select eight stories—*The Other Woman*, *Peggy*, *The Cell*, *Eavesdropping*, *Ndagala*, *The Mess*, *Ojwajani*, and *Real Men*—because they prominently depict urban experiences, informal settlements, and the everyday realities of Nairobi's working-class communities. Data were collected through textual analysis involving close reading of the selected stories. The analysis focused on narrative elements such as characterization, setting, language, imagery, and symbolism to identify representations of urban life. The collected data were analysed using thematic content analysis, where recurring patterns and themes related to urbanity were identified, coded, categorized, and interpreted in relation to the study objectives. The interpretation of the findings was guided by Michel de Certeau's Urban Imaginary Theory. The theory provided a framework for examining how the selected stories construct the city as a lived and imagined space, and how

characters' everyday experiences shape the representation of urbanity within Nairobi's ghetto environment.

Findings and Discussion

The selected short stories present a multifaceted portrayal of urbanity by capturing the everyday experiences, struggles, and contradictions that characterize life in Nairobi's informal settlements. Collectively, the stories depict the city as a space where relationships are shaped by instability, economic survival demands resilience and improvisation, and individuals constantly negotiate social and moral challenges. They also illustrate how overcrowding, poverty, corruption, and inequality influence human interactions while exposing the tension between hope and hardship. Through their diverse characters and settings, the stories construct urbanity as a lived experience in which survival, identity, and morality are continuously contested, thereby providing a rich basis for examining the complexities of everyday life in the ghetto.

The temporal urban relationships

Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories centre on presents the complex and contradictory urban space where individuals navigate both opportunity and hardship. Urban space itself acts as a key medium through which these disconnections are amplified. The architectural layout of city estates, closely packed buildings with paper-thin walls, promotes surveillance and proximity while discouraging genuine intimacy. In *The Other Woman*, Asha and Kilombero are portrayed as an ideal urban couple, seamlessly integrating into their new community and becoming a symbol of warmth and generosity. Their home becomes a social hub where neighbours gather for conversations and companionship, creating an illusion of stability and trust. However, this harmony is short-lived as Kilombero abandons Asha without explanation. His sudden departure shatters the carefully built relationships, exposing the fragile nature of urban connections. Without emotional or social support, Asha is left to navigate her heartbreak alone, highlighting how quickly relationships in urban settings can dissolve, leaving individuals isolated and vulnerable.

Asha experiences emotional turmoil degenerates into alcoholism in an unforgiving urban environment. Once admired for her beauty and charm, she becomes unrecognizable, physically and emotionally drained by her suffering. This points out how urban spaces, despite their sense of community, often lack genuine emotional bonds, leaving those who experience personal loss to struggle alone. Despite witnessing her suffering, no one offered support or comfort. Instead, they avoided her, allowing her to struggle alone. Even when she cried in the streets, people simply watched and returned to their homes without a word. Asha's physical deterioration serves as a metaphor for the social disposability that accompany urban betrayal. This transformation reflects the impermanence of emotional investments in the city, where relationships collapse under the weight of shifting loyalties and self-interest.

In *Peggy* the estate's male population develops romantic fantasies about Peggy which they build into unrealistic versions of her true self. All men in her life perceive her as a dream figure even though they remain completely unaware of her true self. Among this group of men, Odima Nyadima thinks that his daydream about winning Peggy will become a true reality. The belief that his money and social status will sway her to him. The moment Peggy denied his advances became a public humiliation as he said "She was not Adam's Eve. She was fully dressed." She was fully dressed" (Pg14) The sudden revelation destroys his delusion as it reveals how urban relationships separate imagined dreams from actual existence.

The repetition of the phrase "She was fully dressed" (Pg14) not only underscores Odima's disappointment but also offers an ironic commentary on the dissonance between appearance and expectation in urban encounters. It symbolically resists the voyeuristic male gaze and reveals the superficiality embedded in urban gender relations, where assumptions and illusions are often mistaken for emotional substance. This ironic tone highlights the tension between societal expectations of urban femininity and the personal agency Peggy asserts through her refusal. Such tonal shifts and repetition invite readers to critique how the city commodifies intimacy, often reducing individuals to spectacles shaped by fantasy rather than reality.

In *Bodii*, the protagonist's interactions with women in the estate reveal how urban relationships can be both transactional and restrictive. *Bodii*, a dominant figure, uses his influence to attract and control women, making them objects of both admiration and resentment. The girls he chooses receive social recognition, yet they also face silent judgment and entrapment. The imbalance in these relationships reflects the broader reality

of urban life, where individuals often engage in connections driven by necessity rather than genuine emotions. The women in Bodii's world navigate a space where their agency is limited, as rejecting him means social exclusion, while accepting his attention means becoming part of a cycle of dominance and dependency. These dynamics mirror the ways in which urban power operates both socially and spatially, rewarding submission and punishing resistance. Such relationships exemplify how urbanity reshapes intimacy into asymmetrical exchanges driven by control, reputation, and survival. Through the lens of Urban Imagery Theory, the city emerges as a performative arena in which personal agency is constrained by collective judgment and gendered hierarchies, thereby revealing the entrapment embedded in urban romantic negotiations.

The fluid urban interpersonal relations and power dynamics

In the selected ghetto stories, urban social life is depicted as fragmented, shifting, and precarious, revealing a city where interpersonal bonds are fragile, betrayal is common, and personal gain often outweighs emotional integrity. As a figure of both admiration and intimidation, Bodii in *Bodii* commands respect through his physical strength and social influence. His presence dictates how people behave, ensuring that those around him conform to his unspoken rules. Those who seek his approval enjoy privileges, while those who challenge him face severe consequences. His control is absolute, leaving residents with little choice but to submit. This is evident in the way he handles betrayal "...If anyone dared cheat on Bodii, they had only one alternative—move out of the estate..." (Pg 17) Bodii functions not only as a character but also as a literary symbol, an embodiment of volatile urban masculinity and authoritarian charisma. He personifies the precarious balance between admiration and coercion in city life, where influence is exerted through presence, performance, and punishment rather than institutional legitimacy. In this light, Bodii can be read as a metaphor for urban social exile: those who transgress his control are not just punished, they are evicted, excluded, rendered invisible within their own community.

Bodii's influence shows how unofficial power structures control and rule the city through intimidation and unorthodox means. The city environment allows people such as Bodii to achieve dominance by instilling terror throughout their domain thus preventing any potential resistance. Residents of the estate stay quiet about his oppressive behaviour because they do not want to experience his retaliation against those who defy him. The social reality of urban existence shows that people with power enforce social rules while others lacking power must find ways to avoid dangerous confrontations.

Bodii's unorthodox authority is in conversation with formal authority represented in *The Cell*, where police brutality mirrors the informal violence of local strongmen. In *The Cell*, detainees are stripped of their dignity and subjected to inhumane conditions, revealing the corruption within the justice system. The unnamed protagonist in *The Cell* is subjected to dehumanizing conditions, "The floor was messy... vomit, urine, and shit struggling for space" (Pg 34) symbolising how state-sanctioned authority replicates the terror and humiliation already found in informal urban spaces. Instead of ensuring justice, the police use their authority to degrade and control, reinforcing the idea that urban power is frequently exercised without accountability. The brutal conditions in the police cells in *The Cell* serve as a reminder that urban spaces are governed by both visible and invisible forces, each determining who thrives and who suffers. In such an environment, survival depends on understanding power structures and strategically positioning oneself within them.

In the story *Real Men*, the main character, Opuka, displays masculine behaviour during the story by falsely thinking a female passenger stole from him which leads to a public scene of anger. Without seeking verification, the other passengers quickly join in against the woman to demand what they believe she stole. The public response shows that urban power enforcement operates through group decision-making rather than through actual justice systems. The woman stays silent because she understands the social environment on the bus has turned against her through her fear. The police station revelation shows Opuka never experienced robbery at all. Upon realising the truth, the woman uses her newfound power to explain to Opuka that genuine men should properly maintain their property, "...real men should know how to take care of their things..." (Pg 43) This situation exposes how people alter their behaviour because of fear and social pressure that exists in urban environments. The way people are seen by others determines their power status because assumptions and accusations combined with group opinion led to quick power transitions. The dense population and impersonal nature of urban areas lead people to fear reputation destruction instantly alongside social exclusion which compels them to walk cautiously through spaces.

The narrative in the short-story functions as a microcosm of performative justice in urban public spaces. Power, here, is not administered through evidence or legal systems but through spectacle and public outrage, a form of mob ethics shaped by perception rather than principle. The woman's silence and subsequent rhetorical turn, reclaiming agency with "real men should know how to take care of their things" (Pg 43), highlights the volatile and shifting terrain of power in city life. Her assertion rewrites the narrative, suggesting that moral authority in urban spaces is not fixed but fluid, often negotiated in the moment through language and performance.

Surveillance, Power, Control, and the Atmosphere of Fear

People who live in urban areas experience constant surveillance from authority figures and people in general. As Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian argues, "surveillance in urban spaces is not merely about control, but about producing fear as a means of governance" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 21). This constant surveillance transforms the city into a performative space, where identity is shaped by what others see and hear. Urban Imagery Theory positions the city as a site of hyper-visibility, where individuals must continuously negotiate their image in response to social scrutiny. In such spaces, personal authenticity is often sacrificed for social survival.

In the story *Eavesdropping*, people live in close quarters with little separation between personal and communal life. This is depicted when neighbours eagerly listen to a couple's heated argument, treating it as a source of amusement rather than a personal issue. Instead of respecting privacy, they gather to enjoy the spectacle, anticipating a dramatic escalation. Their disappointment when the conflict ends without a major incident is captured in the statement, "They denied us our drama" (Pg 8). This reaction highlights how urban dwellers, accustomed to constant exposure to others' lives, often intrude into personal affairs for their own entertainment.

The story's depiction of eavesdropping transforms voyeurism into a normalized urban behaviour, blurring the boundary between passive observation and moral complicity. This behaviour reflects how surveillance in urban spaces is not just limited to formal institutions but is also maintained through social interactions. Neighbours monitor each other's lives, forming judgments and spreading gossip, which can shape reputations and social standing. In densely populated environments, avoiding scrutiny is nearly impossible, as one's actions are always under observation. The couple in *Eavesdropping* does not just experience their conflict; they unknowingly perform for an audience, reinforcing the idea that urban life turns private matters into public spectacles. This lack of personal boundaries creates pressure to conform to societal expectations, as any misstep can become a topic of discussion within the community.

In *The Other Woman*, Asha and Kilombero's arrival in the estate sparks widespread interest, with neighbors eager to welcome them and be part of their lives. Their generosity and openness make them the center of attention, as people frequently visit their home, share stories, and enjoy their hospitality. However, this attention is not rooted in genuine care but rather in curiosity and social spectacle. When Asha's life takes a downward turn after Kilombero's betrayal, the same community that once celebrated her withdraws, leaving her to suffer alone. The estate, which once revolved around her presence, suddenly treats her with cold indifference, "Nobody talked about her... nobody asked her anything" (Pg 4-5). This shift highlights the fleeting nature of social bonds in urban settings, where people observe and judge but rarely intervene when true support is needed.

Asha's situation illustrates the broader reality of urban life, where maintaining privacy is nearly impossible. Individuals live under constant observation, with their struggles, relationships, and failures becoming part of public discourse. Unlike in rural areas, where communities often offer support during hardships, city dwellers are more likely to observe than to intervene. As urban imagery theory suggests, the city invites exposure while denying intimacy. Surveillance in these stories is not just a structural condition but a cultural norm that distorts empathy, turning neighbours into passive spectators of suffering.

The Hustler Mentality

Economic struggles define life in urban areas, where survival depends on resilience and determination. Many rely on informal work, side jobs, and inconsistent employment due to scarce job opportunities and intense market competition. The high cost of living pushes them to maintain several jobs along with small business operations to maintain survival. These residents need to continually adapt to economic shifts because their

employment status is not secure so they must constantly find different ways to earn money. Urban residents need resilience since they experience job instability together with irregular income and perpetual financial challenges. The lifestyle in urban areas requires continuous readiness because rural communities maintain stability through agriculture and community assistance. Survival in this environment requires a hustler mentality because people must take risks while faced with uncertain situations and innovate new ways to generate income.

In the story *Ndagala*, Hera represents those who struggle economically in urban areas by demonstrating his ability to survive through determination and flexibility. His ten years of job searching prove futile until he starts collecting waste paper which eventually makes him financially secure. He shows disbelief and gratitude after achieving financial stability, “If this is a dream, let me not wake up” (Pg 44). The combination of his perseverance and resourcefulness enables him to develop his business thereby demonstrating that the city rewards people through unusual means instead of standard employment.

Ndagala portrays the hustler mentality as it shows that people must take risks to find and seize new opportunities to overcome economic obstacles in the city. Urban fortune proves to be unpredictable because Hera’s newfound success ends shortly after it begins. A sudden tragic accident cuts his life short showing us that city stability remains always unpredictable. Every hardworking person faces risks because external forces control aspects that cannot be controlled by their actions. The continuous struggle to survive economically in urban environments requires hard work yet an individual’s dedication and perseverance cannot protect against outside forces that might halt their progress. Hera’s trajectory, from failure to fortune to fatality, functions as a narrative metaphor for the volatility of urban life. His story captures the precarious triumphs and inevitable tragedies of those forced to hustle in an unforgiving economic landscape.

Similarly, Kandoya’s work as a waste collector in *The Mess*, reflects the struggles of low-income earners in urban spaces, where survival often depends on taking jobs that society looks down upon. Despite the essential nature of his work, he is treated with mockery and disrespect, particularly by children who follow him around, singing and throwing sand at him. His reaction to their taunts reveals his silent suffering: “...Then he would turn, look at us sorrowfully, and begin his usual chase...” (Pg 53). Though he performs a necessary service, he is not valued or respected, highlighting how urban economies rely on invisible labour while simultaneously demeaning those who do it. The sorrowful glance, followed by his resigned pursuit of the children, conveys a quiet dignity intertwined with humiliation. The language here, ‘sorrowfully,’ ‘usual chase’, underscores how routine his degradation has become, revealing the normalized marginalization of urban labourers.

Kandoya’s experience represents the reality of many urban workers who endure humiliation while trying to earn an honest living. His sorrowful glance before chasing the children suggests a deep awareness of his social position since he knows he is ridiculed but has no choice but to continue his work. This reflects the broader economic struggle in cities, where some jobs, despite being crucial, are viewed as degrading. The contrast between his necessity and the disrespect he faces underscores the paradox of urban labour, where the most vital roles are often the least appreciated, and dignity is a luxury not afforded to the working poor. In this way, class tension manifests not only economically but socially; those at the bottom are rendered both essential and invisible.

In *The Cell*, the protagonist’s experience in detention highlights the vulnerability of the urban lower class, where those without financial or social power are easily exploited. Arbitrary arrests and police brutality are common, targeting individuals who lack the resources to defend themselves. The protagonist, like many others, finds himself trapped in a corrupt system that treats poverty as a crime. Without legal protection or influence, detainees are subjected to inhumane conditions and mistreatment, reinforcing the harsh reality that justice in urban spaces often favours the wealthy and well-connected. This illustrates how urban life exposes the most disadvantaged to constant threats from both formal and informal power structures. The poor live in fear of law enforcement, knowing that their lack of financial means makes them easy targets for abuse. Detention is not just about crime; it becomes a mechanism for control, ensuring that the powerless remain oppressed.

In the context of Urban Imagery theory, in urban centers, individuals must constantly adapt to changing economic conditions, competing for limited opportunities in both formal and informal sectors. Many work tirelessly in unstable jobs, engage in side hustles, or create small businesses to sustain themselves. However, despite their efforts, factors such as market fluctuations, rising living costs, and systemic inequalities often prevent them from achieving financial security. Unlike rural communities, where subsistence living can provide

some stability, urban life offers no guarantees—success can be temporary, and setbacks can be sudden. This constant uncertainty forces city dwellers to remain in a state of continuous struggle, demonstrating that while resilience is necessary, it is not always enough to secure long-term economic stability.

Thus, economic hardship in these stories is not merely a backdrop but a defining urban condition. The texts use characters like Hera, Kandoya, and the detainee in *The Cell* to illustrate how marginalization is reinforced through labour, law, and social perception. Urban imagery theory allows us to see these figures not just as individuals but as representations of a broader, often invisible, class structure shaped by the rhythms and injustices of city life.

Social decay and moral dilemmas

In the city, survival often forces individuals to make difficult choices, sometimes resorting to dishonesty, corruption, or illegal activities to meet their needs. As traditional social bonds weaken, people become more self-interested, prioritizing personal gain over community well-being. Issues such as drug abuse, exploitation, and neglect of the vulnerable emerge as urban life becomes increasingly competitive and isolating. The fast-paced nature of the city also desensitizes individuals to suffering, making them less likely to intervene in situations of injustice. As a result, moral boundaries are blurred, and social structures weaken, creating an environment where decay and ethical conflicts become part of daily life.

In the short-story *Ojwajani*, social decay and moral dilemmas emerge as a couple's deep desperation for a child leads them to an unnatural and terrifying fate. Their longing for parenthood, a natural desire, becomes an obsession that drives them to defy ethical and natural boundaries. When their wish is finally granted, they do not receive an ordinary child but a monstrous being that consumes everything, including human flesh, "... Ojwajani returned carrying a child under his armpits..." (Pg 31). This horrifying outcome marks the beginning of destruction rather than joy. Their desire, once innocent, turns into a nightmare, reflecting how urban pressures can push individuals to extreme actions with devastating consequences.

The grotesque imagery of the monstrous child can be interpreted as a symbol of the perverse outcomes of unchecked urban desire. The creature becomes a metaphor for the failure of nature and nurture in the context of urban decay, where systemic neglect and desperation corrode ethical foundations. This scene depicts how moral dilemmas in urban life arise when individuals are forced to make impossible choices in pursuit of their deepest needs. The couple's situation mirrors the ethical struggles faced by many in cities, where ambition, desperation, and survival instincts can lead to unintended harm. In an environment where personal desires often outweigh ethical considerations, people sometimes cross moral boundaries. *Ojwajani* therefore serves as a warning about the dangers of unchecked desperation, revealing how urban decay not only affects society but also distorts personal values and human relationships.

The story *Real Men* reflects social decay and moral dilemmas in urban life. The story follows Opuka, who experiences public humiliation after falsely accusing a woman on a bus of theft. Instead of verifying the claim, the passengers quickly turn against the woman, demanding that she return what she allegedly stole. This rush to judgment exposes how urban communities often prioritize spectacle over truth, reinforcing mob justice rather than due process. This moment can be read as a ritualized form of public shaming, wherein the woman's body becomes a site of collective spectacle. The grotesque suggestion that she "should give the man back his thing" evokes not just urban voyeurism but also the collapse of legal and ethical boundaries, highlighting the city's tendency to commodify humiliation and suppress justice.

The children in *The Mess* mock Kandoya as he collects waste because they follow him while singing and throwing sand at him to shame him for his position. Society denies him respect for his labour yet continues to exploit his work as the public treats him for ridicule because they align with an urban moral decline. The long-term mistreatment transforms Kandoya into someone who retaliates against the children by delivering a bucket of waste to their doorstep instead of forgiving them. Kandoya's retaliatory act reflects a deeply internalised sense of injustice, his gesture is not simply vindictive but emblematic of a social system where dignity is systematically eroded. His story shows how even the oppressed may reproduce the very violence they have suffered, further entrenching the cycles of moral deterioration embedded in urban life.

In *Ojwajani*, *Real Men*, and *The Mess*, ethical erosion becomes dramatized through grotesque symbolism, public shame, and retaliatory violence, emphasizing that moral dilemmas in urban fiction are not anecdotal but

central to understanding the ethical consequences of urban survival. Literature examines the intricate details of city life through stories which demonstrate that urban moral complications stem from both individual shortcomings and the fundamental organization of urban environments.

Conclusion

This study examined the portrayal of urbanity in *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories* and established that the anthology presents the city as a complex social space characterized by instability, resilience, and contradiction. The findings demonstrate that urban life is shaped by fragile interpersonal relationships, shifting power structures, constant surveillance, economic uncertainty, and moral dilemmas. Through the experiences of ordinary residents, the stories portray the ghetto as a lived environment where survival often requires adaptability, negotiation, and difficult personal choices. Rather than depicting the city as either entirely oppressive or entirely hopeful, the anthology presents urbanity as a dynamic condition in which hope and hardship, inclusion and exclusion, as well as opportunity and vulnerability coexist. The study further concludes that the selected stories challenge conventional representations of African cities by foregrounding the everyday experiences of marginalized communities. Guided by Michel de Certeau's Urban Imaginary Theory, the analysis shows that urban spaces acquire meaning through the practices, interactions, and experiences of those who inhabit them. Consequently, *Bodii and Other Ghetto Stories* portrays the Nairobi ghetto not merely as a geographical location but as a social and imaginative space where identities, relationships, and moral values are continuously negotiated. The anthology therefore makes an important contribution to African urban literature by offering a nuanced understanding of the complexities that define everyday life in contemporary urban environments.

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