

The Portrayal of African Humanism in Selected Novels of Meja Mwangi

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Abstract: Being humane is a primary requirement for mutual and healthy relations in society. African humanism is built on the notion of ‘I am because you are, and because you are, so I am.’ Accordingly, humanism is the lifeblood that nourishes an integrated and cohesive community, where respect and dignity of every individual is upheld. The study interrogated the portrayal of African humanism in the selected novels of the Kenyan writer, Meja Mwangi. In this paper, Meja Mwangi’s popular fiction, *Going Down River Road* (1976) and *The Cockroach Dance* (1979) are studied. The texts represent Mwangi’s urban-trilogy, among his forty-four novels. The study’s discussion was also enhanced by secondary texts such as relevant journals articles, books, theses and internet were obtained from the library during this research. The study was qualitative in approach, employing analytical research design in the collection and analysis of data. Qualitative data was gathered through content analysis. The study population comprised African popular fiction, with special focus on popular novels by Kenyan popular writers. The study sampled Meja Mwangi’s novels that are forty-four in number. Purposive sampling technique was employed with the inclusion criterion being Meja Mwangi’s novels that address the humanistic issues being investigated. The sample size was Meja Mwangi’s three urban-based novels. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources through close textual reading. Data analysis was conducted with the guidance of Marxist theoretical framework. Data collected was categorised along the study’s units of analysis, namely Meja Mwangi’s thematic concerns on African humanism, characterisation, and style. The study established that, in Mwangi’s novels, societal stratification influences the humaneness of individuals. It was further discovered that cohesion in the society exists when members adhere to moral values of human dignity and respect for human life. The study would presumably contribute to existing knowledge on humanism in literature and art. It also provides a basis for future research in literature, particularly that focusing on popular fiction and its reflections of Utu.

Keywords: African Humanism, Popular fiction, Society, Contemporary, Social stratification, *Utu*, *Ubuntu*

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the phenomenon of humanness in society based on a literary analysis of the novels of the Kenyan writer of popular fiction, Meja Mwangi. There is an absolute need for persons to be humane society. Being humane requires the members of society to strive for mutual understanding, practice respect for human life, and uphold the dignity of every person.¹ Furthermore, Edeh avers that humanism is a philosophy that puts the human race first in the line of significance.² This study specifically focused on African humanism, which is characterised by collectivism practised within an interwoven society. These characteristics of African humanism are collectively conceptualised in the *Ubuntu* spirit, which is summed up in the philosophy of “I am because we are.” This means that an individual belongs to a society and is bound by and to societal norms and customs that define the culture of the group, which the individuals members constitute.³

Therefore, African humanism is interdependent and communalistic rather than being individualistic. This paper thus interrogates the portrayal of African humanism with a view to illustrating its definitive features of oneness, sharing and human dignity, among other moral values, in practice. The discussion is anchored on Meja Mwangi’s selected fiction, and is based on the tools of the Marxist approach as developed by Eagleton.⁴ This perspective focuses on society in terms of societal stratification, and its repercussions on individuals. It argues that stratification of society leads to oppression and subsequently to class struggles.

Through the lenses of this theory, the study sought to understand how Meja Mwangi, in his novels, chronicles the tantalizing societal human conditions. First from this approach, this paper interrogates the impact of class-formation, capitalism and class struggle on society as portrayed in the selected novels. The Marxist

criticism further assisted in the investigation of how the writer depicts these issues by focusing on the changing epochs that lead to the deterioration of African humanism in the selected texts. For more discussion on Meja Mwangi's representation of *utu* in the contemporary Kenyan, relevant critical works such as those by Kehinde.⁵ Kehinde explored aesthetics of realism and post-independence disillusionment in Meja Mwangi's two novels, namely *Kill Me Quick* and *Going Down River Road*. Unlike Kehinde's work, however, this paper focused on Meja Mwangi's portrayal of humanness in the selected texts.

The interrogation of African humanism in this paper, therefore, begins by critically looking at how individual characters' human nature has been altered in these novels by focusing on the individual character's interaction, utterances, and behaviour. Secondly, the paper examines the representation of *Utu* in each of the three novels, *Kill Me Quick*, *Going Down River Road* and *The Cockroach Dance*. The aim is to establish the changing trends of African humanism. Finally, this paper makes a general conclusion based on the overall trends, transformation and dynamism of African humanism in the current Kenya society.

In these novels, the current society is depicted by the writer as a habitat, occupied by individuals whose personality is oblique, and disordered due to the prevailing inhumane practices such as classism, crime, inhospitality, crude individualism and atrocities. This discussion argues that these societal ills are contrary to the values of *Utu*.⁶ In this regard, African humanism is, according to Mphahlele⁷, a phenomenon that, if adhered to, is supposed to enable a person to value the welfare of fellow humans above personal economic gains. *Utu* thus entails a person's recognition of the essence and sacredness of life for life's sake within a community.

The assertion that, 'a person is a person through other persons'⁸ is paramount in this paper's deliberations. This is because African humanism is anchored on the African traditional values such as humanity, care, sharing, teamwork spirit, compassion, dignity and respect. Moreover, Msengana articulately argues that:

Although *Utu* -humanness has an authoritarian direction, in that it acknowledges clear dimensions and origins of authority within the social structure, it fully recognizes that every person is a social being who can realize his/her African humanism in the company of and interaction with other human beings.⁹

The examination of the characters' human nature to determine the extent to which they have been affected negatively is guided by the fact that an individual's *utu* is something that springs from within oneself (innate), or better still, from within a society.⁹ Furthermore, the vitality of humanness is concretized by the reflections of Tutu,¹⁰ who insists that the practice of African humanism in the traditional African society was adhered to strongly due to the unity that existed and which encouraged positive behaviour among members. Tutu further maintains that humanness is rooted in being humane, dressed in gentleness, having hospitality and inconveniencing oneself for the sake of other humans.¹⁰

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

African Humanism in *Going Down River Road*

African humanism is pictorially chronicled by Meja Mwangi in *Going Down River Road* (1976) through scenes and episodes that focus on individuals whose *Utu* is fading, and / or others whose humanness is at stake. Historically, this is a novel that solidified Mwangi's literary reputation, winning him the Kenyatta Award for a second time. It is also a novel par excellence, with recommended reading in most of the tourist guidebooks in Kenya, particularly those that cater for the hitchhiking set.¹² For instance, characters such as Ocholla, Ben, Wini, Susan among others are depicted as victims whose humane dispositions are transformed as they involve themselves in societal activities unconsciously or consciously. The novel uncovers social and economic realities in postcolonial Kenya, in relation to people's lives as represented by the characters in the text. The main criticism in this literary work is targeted at vices such as poverty, hunger, brutalization, despair, cynicism, alienation and classism, which have contributed to the sub-human and demoralizing behaviour of individuals portrayed in the novel, which is an extension of the current Kenyan nation. In fact, the novel depicts vices that contrast the traditional virtues of socialism for which the African past was known.⁵

First, Mwangi focuses on the rot in the dwellings of the modern Kenyan urban society, in which classes of persons live:

There were all sorts of people in the neighbourhood. There was a childless old woman who lived on hawking green vegetable matter. There were two refuse collectors, a Grogan Road Mechanic who swore he was never a thief and three retired whores who only did the occasional special duty with the landlord or somebody else. There were two office clerks and their messengers' families. There were the city council policemen and the unlicensed roadside cobbler. Two neighbours who spent the days racing one another round town in the course of their duties before coming home to be good neighbours for the night. Then there were Max and his bugs in room next-door.¹²

This is a description of the state of impoverished individuals that aimlessly preoccupy themselves with activities, which enable them live. The writer discloses a society that is divided into classes of individuals, in this case the poor jobless masses. They are a disenchanting lot, and disconnected from one another. This is a

portrayal of a state of gloom and doom for these characters that are not in touch with others. Humanely, persons are supposed to interact and not to exist in isolated classes. This is a contradiction of the African philosophy's spirit built on the assertion that "I am because we are; and since we are, I am".¹³ Seemingly, it is the abject poverty that has dragged these individuals into this withdrawn condition of absurdity. Interaction among persons is mandatory for connectivity and shared experience. The fact that Mwangi portrays characters literally existing as groups shows a society where there is declining mutual respect, concern and compassion for others. Probably, these individuals have been pushed to the periphery due to inevitable contemporary capitalist system, which is class-oriented. Similarly, focusing on these individual groupings, Ticha claims that:

This passage does not directly describe the physical space, neither does it name the characters but it shows the "conjunction of heterogeneous activities and modes of production...that create a platform for social interaction and livelihood. Description of the professions, habits and activities of the characters...foreshadow gloom, desperation, abandonment... the exploitative landlord stands for the wealthy and the successful, while Max and his bugs represent the criminal element that is the feature of every city...every other occupant of the plot represents the struggling resilient poor and perhaps the failures of the urban community...representative of a larger entity-the fictional and maybe the actual Nairobi."¹⁴

Indeed, this is a revelation of a contemporary Kenya that is faced with communal challenges that have squeezed out humanness from persons. Therefore, the crimes, exploitation, inequality, classism and crude individualism that have taken toll, disputing the once cherished values of an integrated society.²

Second, Ben the protagonist in *Going Down River Road*, is depicted as an alienated and disillusioned character in twists of fate since he is educated but is jobless. Ben does not mind living in a devastating and an inhumane dirty room that he shares with Wini, the commercial sex worker and her child, Baby. It is disrespectful, demeaning and debasing for a man from a cultural perspective to share a bed, full of the baby's urine, as divulged in the novel:

Baby should have not drunk coffee. He urinated all of it during the night and now the smell lay thick and throat catching, overcoming even the perfume of his mother's bed across the room...But Ben was not asleep any more. The pungent baby urine stink had awakened him long before his usual waking up time.¹²

This is an absurd and desperate situation in which Ben finds himself. After losing his military job, he becomes impoverished; he is unable to pay house rent. This situation forces him to forego his dignity and integrity in order to get shelter, love and food. On the other hand, Wini is revealed as an embodiment of humanness. In fact, she models the idea of "I am because we are." Illustratively, she accommodates Ben in her small room, and shares all that she has with him. She further helps him to settle and overcome the dehumanizing experiences that he goes through. Ben is resigned. The yearning for basic needs such as shelter drives him to inhumane shanty places that he would have had the last choice to live in, if he had a paying job.

Assertively, a society that seems to have closed its eyes to its members is one whose African humanism is at the crossroads and therefore needs redesigning. To Ben, life is cruel and offers no satisfaction. This is due to his hurried and irrational dismissal from the army for engaging in unlawful arms dealings. It is humane to investigate the circumstances involved in a crime alleged to have been committed, but Ben, is portrayed as an individual who is inhumanely sacked as evidenced by his state of helplessness. Furthermore, his pathetic situation is also shown by his inability to afford decent housing, because he willingly shares Wini's apartment.¹² Accordingly, this kind of treatment denies him the essence of being humane, the conviction of having high self-esteem. This explains why he has become alcoholic, pessimist and an absurdist.

Consequently, Ben stoops so low that he shares personal space with Wini, a commercial sex worker, college student and secretary. Besides, he suffers humiliation when discharged from the Pan African Insurance Company, following a discovery that he had earlier been dismissed from the military, after a guilty verdict from a marshal court.¹⁵ Assertively, these experiences have further contributed to Ben's shaky embrace of self-dignity as reflected in this episode. Concurrently, Wini's daring behaviour of bringing men into her single bedroom that she shares with her son shows the decadence of moral values of contemporary Kenyan city, a cosmopolitan society.¹⁴

Furthermore, Ben's direction and vision for his life is jeopardized when Wini suddenly deserts him, leaving him her son, Baby. Left in a state of poverty, Ben is helpless and cannot afford to pay house rent. He instead opts to move in with Ocholla, one of his workmates at Development House, in Downtown Nairobi city. Ben's invasion of Ocholla's shack is detrimental to himself as well as Ocholla, who foregoes his privacy in order to accommodate Ben as narrated by the writer:

Now he approaches the door slowly, wearily, weak light filters through the cracks on the door and the walls. Smell of the cooking food seeps out of the silent hut. He taps lightly on the door. The iron sheet door resounds with noise. For a few moments after that nothing happens. He sucks in his breath and taps again. Someone clears his throat and gruff muffled voice demands: 'who is it?'

'Ben.' After a thoughtful pause the door creaks open...Ocholla's voice when it eventually finds a way out of his mouth reaches out seriously cool. What do you want at this time? Of the night, Ben.¹²

This is a depiction of how poverty demeans individuals. In real sense, the act of sharing personal space with another family displays lack of personal responsibility and self-reliance. However, Ben decides to put up with Ocholla. Given the fact that Ben has been unfairly dismissed from the army, inevitably, he is helpless and hopeless. On the other hand, Ocholla is humane and accommodative since he accepts to host Ben irrespective of the limited space in his poorly built shack. Truly, this incident unravels the escapist and unsteady lifestyle of Ben that drags him to degrading levels. In this, the writer shows the impact of poverty, that is, its demoralization and dehumanization of persons. This is an accurate depiction of a society in which individuals engage only in interest-based relationships. This is articulately revealed in the notion that "relationship between the two classes of people in the world of the novel is, on the whole, not a harmonious or healthy one because class distinction, and consequently class dissonance mostly characterize it".¹⁶ For instance, the decision by Ben to move into Ocholla's small and bare hut embodies the disastrous consequences of any behaviour, attitude or activity that invades or contravenes the private-public divide or boundary.¹⁴ Additionally, Ticha contends:

...the passage reveals a tendency by the poor characters to engage in activities and attitude that disrupt the cherished African value of *Ubuntu*. The narrator seems to suggest that friendship and all the exchange that go with it like drinking together; talking; eating; sharing a cigarette end;...positive values of sharing that alleviate the impact of poverty in some poor communities-are abused when some members of the community move from these less personal forms to more intimate ones like sharing one's "shanty hut" and treasured "last morsel". Ben's intrusion...inconsideration for the boundaries of sharing..."betrayal and exploitation of his friend's and perhaps of the traditional African value of *Ubuntu* or humanity.¹⁴

Ben's desperation for shelter and food as depicted in this excerpt shows a society that lacks concern for its members. Jones responds to this condition of poverty by maintaining that people migrate to urban centres to look for jobs, which are hardly available.¹⁷ Inevitably, the state of biting poverty forces them to become slum-dwellers, and this contributes to their depiction as social misfits by the privileged class.¹⁷

In *Going Down River Road*, the protagonist, Ben, is ceaselessly drunk, and associated with drinking places that include Karara Centre, Capricorn, Tree Bottoms and *Sukuma Wiki* – the labourer's specialist. Heavy drinking of unhygienic drinks that include illegally brewed and often poisonous liquor shows his dehumanized nature. By drinking, Ben hopes to bury the pains and suffering, which spring from his impoverished situation.⁵ For instance, at *Karara Centre*, Ben's regular presence is disclosed:

Ben lets his eyes rove the dimly lit stuffy place. Everyone in sight drinks *karara*, a home-made brew that looks like muddy water, tastes like sisal juice and is as powerful as gasoline. The 'Beer Menu' on the wall announces the price as eighty cents, which is one third of the price of pilsner and a quarter the price of any of the best Scotch whisky...they are simply a lot of happy, drunk people. In the bar, few can afford ties or suits, and no one pretends to be decently drunk they shout, froth at the mouth and fight before crawling home to bed. Few manage to walk out of here. They just slide out into the rubbish-strewn street and some-how get home safely to return the following day for more.¹²

Normally, in an African setting, taking beer is a social activity that provides relaxation and chance for individuals to establish familiarity with one another. In fact, this would be a time to realize the societal spirit of "I am because we are." On the contrary, in this episode, drinking alcohol seems to be a way of helping these casual workers to avoid thinking about their dehumanizing working conditions. This is a position of demoralization for Ben since he joins the masses in the drinking 'drama.' In the novel, Mwangi reveals that formerly Ben was a soldier, more so, a lieutenant as revealed in this conversation:

'I had him kicked out of the army.' 'What army?' 'Soldiers.' Ocholla's face clouds with respect and awe. 'You are a soldier?' Ben replied, 'An officer. A first lieutenant'.¹²

This situation reveals the initial social status of Ben and Onesmus, a fellow military officer. They both suffer due to dismissal from the army. Consequently, they are rendered jobless, a situation that is distressful and humiliating for them. Perhaps Ocholla is shocked to realize how cruel and uncaring social structures can be in causing pain to others such as Ben. From this dialogue, Ocholla is amazed when he learns how sophisticated Ben's life had been. Ocholla cannot fathom the dehumanizing circumstances that have led to the now disfigured and impoverished Ben.

Presumably, Ben's salary as a soldier is meagre, perhaps a state that propels him to unfaithfulness in the military, as reflected in his attempt to engage in crime. This certainly is a revelation of how the modern Kenyan social institutions, such as the army, unconsciously and consciously⁴ cause exploitation and dehumanization of workers. Therefore, the reckless sacking of workers without proper investigation leads to dehumanization. The frustration that Ben goes through is explicated further by Mwangi:

Ben had met her on the day he was kicked out of the Pan African Insurance Company. It must have been someone from the bloody Sixth Army who betrayed him, maybe the C.O. bastard. Mr. Wilkins, the company manager called Ben to his office. Ben had no idea... the manager tossed the military discharge letter across the desk...he wished Ben all the best in life and fired him. Ben collected his monthly pay and went straight to the nearest bar. He got drunk and thought. It would be impossible to get a job in the civil service. He was without a job and drinking his last pay. He was determined to do it in style, and probably with a woman.¹²

Perhaps this is the revelation of how members of society fail to be considerate and mindful of others' welfare. Ben suffers after being sacked from by the military, and secondly, by the Pan-African Insurance Company. Indeed, this is a double tragedy that leads to his disillusionment. Inevitably, this is why Ben decides to spend all his monthly pay in the bar as shown in the above excerpt. Concurrently, this state of drunkenness that portrays these characters as escapists and demeaned individuals is also echoed by Kehinde⁵, who maintains that *Going Down River Road* is a sophisticated study of the effects of social oppression, particularly an exploration of the ways in which class oppression brutalizes, and dehumanizes the psyche of the oppressed.¹² Certainly, this unravels what prevails in the Kenyan society, which hosts many jobless persons wallowing in abject poverty and other debasing human conditions. These inhumane experiences deny individuals their sense of humanity.

The novel also illustrates how classism leads to the suppression, exploitation and oppression of the masses – the poor, the lower class. The author pays attention to the casual workers of Development House who are distracted and objectified from the way they behave: 'A few metres away from them, a couple of dejected workers lie forlornly asleep, sprawled under a truck to keep away from the sun.'¹² Additionally, the workers have resigned to the oppressive system, that is, Patel and Chakur Contractors, and have let themselves to be used exploitatively without minding about their dignity and humanity. The writer further shows how the workers at Development House appear:

At long last the gong signals lunchtime. Time for grub. Everybody drops whatever they have in the hands...Ben...joins the procession. It is hard to imagine how large a labour force there is on Development House until you see them scramble for lunch. Big ones, small ones, all raggedly dusty with cement powder from head to toe and as ravenous as Grogan Road roaches.¹²

The workers receive meagre pay. The food kiosks from which they eat are dirty, and the surrounding environment is harsh, since they relax on gravel during lunch breaks. It is also declared in the text that these workers can only afford to shop for their basic needs at end-month because they inadequate pay at the Development House.¹² Employees are also depicted as passive recipients of all forms of harsh treatment from society, and are portrayed as sub-humans who understand nobody, not even themselves, in a nutshell, they are dehumanized.⁵ Besides, they are referred to as 'hands,' a show of how they are perceived by the oppressing rich Indian firm owner they work for. This suggests the labelling and objectification they have already received as 'hands' due to the degrading kind of job they do.¹⁸ These lowly valued and paid workers painfully suffer under the current Kenyan stratified nation, which result from socio-economic factors such as capitalism and ownership of property by the privileged few.¹⁹ Assertively, this vice of classism is negated by the belief that a person is a being in relation to others and life is about sharing, a virtue that upholds human dignity.²⁰

In *Going Down River Road*, the character of Mbugua is portrayed as an individual who is ruthless, inhumane, and has no respect for other persons' property. When he meets Ben, he exposes his inhumane nature as narrated by the author:

'When we want money, me and the boys, we just go out and get it.' He added after a pause: 'We just fetch it in. From where it is. 'Wherever it is.' Ben's face clouded. The other noticed his uneasiness. 'That's it,' he shrugged. 'We just... eh, go collect. 'Just like that?' Just like that!' 'Banks?' Mbugua's mind wrestled with inhibitions. He shrugged. 'Wherever.' Ben took a long drink, his cool calculating eyes watching, figuring, wondering. When he spoke, it was with a sure, hard voice. 'In other words you are robbers.' Mbugua blew out thick black tobacco smoke, spoke without looking at him. 'That is a matter of difference in terminology.' 'And you want my help?' That is the main point' he nodded. Ben shook his head. 'I am sorry, but I am not that way out yet.'¹²

This is a revelation of the deterioration of moral values in individuals. Mbugua indicates that he simply robs the banks. His is a show of selfishness and crude individualism that overshadows the spirit of *Utu*. Evidently, Mbugua is not alone in this errant life of robbery. He has a gang of youths into which he is luring Ben to join. Being ruthless and inhumane, Mbugua coaxes Ben to follow suit. Nevertheless, Ben, being innately caring and humane, declines. Arguably, the negotiation between Mbugua and Ben reveals the tension between bad and good in society. The writer shows that this tension happens at the personal and individual level. The character of Mbugua demonstrates disrespect to the property of others. The urge to callously snatch other

people's belongings comes naturally to Mbugua. In *Going Down River Road*, Mwangi shows how the present-day Kenyan society is typically distorted by atrocities like mugging, pick-pocketing, robbery and alienation.

Another important character in *Going Down River Road* is Wini. Wini is also used to explore inhumane practices that affect the personality of other characters like Ben, Baby, and Ocholla. To begin with, Wini deserts Ben and her son, Baby, without any display of emotion. The writer vividly describes how Wini stealthily abandons Ben and their Baby:

The house is locked from the outside. There is no light from within, though baby is in there making a racket. Ben fetches his key, opens up and switches on light. Baby ceases crying and gets up on the bed, all washed up in urine and rinsed in tears. He regards Ben, the large baby-eyes wider and red with weeping. Ben pats him on the head and lifts him to the floor. Where is your mother? 'She went.' 'Where?' Baby takes the mucous-covered fingers from his mouth and points vaguely. 'To buy me sweets, he says...The radio station closes at eleven. Still no Wini. The resulting silence absence harder to bear. Ben smokes quietly tries to think of his job, Ocholla, Yussuf and his bhang.¹²

This is a realistic presentation of a familiar social situation to the reader. Wini has callously abandons her baby. This is an indicator of how her humanity has been obliterated by circumstances and experiences. In contrast to Wini, Ben portrays traces of concern for Baby. He strives to give the child some sense of fatherly love, despite being a foster father to Baby. At first, during her short-lived intimate relationship with Ben, Wini exhibits humane traits such as being accommodative, caring, loving and compassionate. It is also stated that 'Wini has been used, misused, enjoyed, exploited, and finally discarded by many men and now she resorts into tasting a life that could be more blissful and more socially respectful'.¹⁶ Therefore, her loss of the sense of humanity is clearly a result of the experiences she has gone through.

It is inhumane and degrading for a mother to abandon her biological child as Wini does. Nonetheless, Wini abandons the impoverished Ben, and her only son, Baby, for her wealthy boss, Mr. Caldwell. Her pursuit of wealth has robbed her of her humanity. Eagleton rightly argues that all our actions and responses such as eating, working and playing are related in some ways to our culture and society.⁴ As such, Wini's behaviour is a replica of what goes on in the Kenyan society where personal relationships are defined by materialistic interests. In response to this situation, Ticha also postulates thus:

Therefore, despite the collective African value that recommends the "sharing everything that belongs to them, even the smallest thing"... challenges in the urban setting call for a rethinking of values. In fact, the positive communal values that would be found in a rural area disappear in an urban slum and get replaced by possessive, individualistic tendencies.¹⁴

Female characters in *Going Down River Road* are portrayed as easy compromisers of their dignity, integrity and self-respect. Many of them are involved in commercial sex, as seen in the example of Susan. Susan is a flat character who is breast-feeding a three-month old baby. However, she is involved in commercial sex work, which even irritates her clients. Additionally, she portrays her state of disillusionment and dejection when she mindlessly and shamelessly entices men like Ben into intimacy. Barely after she delivers her baby, she gets back to her commercial sex enterprise, without much care for her new-born child. Indeed, when her customer, Ben, realizes her condition, he is also disturbed, as disclosed by the writer:

The baby holds with flesh-coloured hands and whimpers satisfaction. Ben watches the rough skin peeling off the face and hands, the baby as fragile as the yolk of an egg. 'How old?' One month.' He gets off the bed grabs his coat. 'I must be going now. 'She says nothing. He takes out five shillings tosses it on to the bed. 'One month old... and this!' his hand sweeps the dingy room. She bites her lower lip, a little frightened and pitiful. 'Come... come to trade in this kind of...' 'Please stop it.' He snorts, gets into his dark coat. 'You shouldn't have...' 'Go away,' she says. 'Bastard slut,' he regrets it almost immediately.¹²

Commercial sex work is common in certain alleys of Nairobi such as River Road and Grogan Road. These places are often crowded and have popular drinking dens such as *Karara* Centre and Eden sex jungle.²¹ Concurrently, Ticha claims that:

The drinking house "tempts" Ben to go into it and to later engage in irresponsible intercourse with a sixteen year old girl. The girl shares a small room as "home" in the bar with her one month old baby and other prostitutes and their customers. The room is "stale with urine and sex...in it, prostitutes shout *next?* To a queue of waiting sex customers, in the presence of one month old baby...This is indeed a shocking representation of life in the drinking house. It stands as an indictment of moral...psychological decay that the condition of poverty has in the Nairobi setting.¹⁴

Ben and Susan are shown as having diminished sense of self-respect and dignity. They engage in careless sex. For them, sex is just a means of escaping their frustration and disillusionment. For some, like Susan, commercial sex work has become the only means of meeting their daily basic needs. In essence,

characters like Susan have been pushed to the brink of frustration, so that they have to sell the only thing that still makes them human, namely their body, which is also an extension of their dignity and self-worth.

In concurrence, Kehinde argues that Mwangi, in *Going Down River Road*, portrays both male and female characters who suffer under the same yoke of capitalism and who live in a community that impoverishes them.⁵ He further avers that the womenfolk have a double burden since they face the affiliated challenge of prostitution. It is no surprise, therefore, that the character of Susan shows no sense of humanity for her child and her own body. She continues to indulge in commercial sex even when she is not physically fit for such activities.

One of the defining moral values embedded in African humanism is respect for human life. This concept requires that individuals treat other persons humanely and they should expect similar treatment from others. Therefore, when Ocholla intentionally kills Onesmus as revealed in the story, it negates the *Utu* spirit of "I am because we are." In fact, this is vividly captured in *Going Down River Road* by Mwangi:

Suddenly someone screams. Yussuf pulls up glances upwards and curses, 'mother of the pregnant Punjab Monkey...!' Ben has never heard the foreman swear so vehemently. He looks up and perceives enough reason to swear in any language. Ocholla's crane bucket screams free line through the hot air... the white topped tipper has been covered to useless shell. Blood spills in a steady trickle from within the wreckage. Onesmus' squashed body lies trapped within a large mass of minced flesh and bones...Ocholla stares at him almost hostile. He opens his mouth to speak but says nothing...He drags hard on his cigarette. "I do not know why I did it. It was madness, madness, Ben".¹²

In this scene, Ochollais portrayed as heartless and inhumane. He does not recognize Onesmus as a fellow human being who is equally fighting for his space and who has a right to live. Edeh articulates the African worldview on the sacredness and essence of human life by echoing a neighbour's cautionary advice to Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* regarding adopted Ikemefuna: "this child calls you father do not have a hand in his death".² In *Going Down River Road*, both Ocholla and Onesmus are site workers of Development House. As such, they are linked together by their work. In this regard, they have bonded, which explains why it is shocking when Ocholla mirthlessly kills his workmate. In this sense, Ocholla is portrayed as a callous, dehumanized and animalized individual. Besides, it is against human rights and society's norms to exterminate another person's life.

Mbiti argues that, in the African worldview, people owe their existence to others because a person is part of the whole and whatever happens to an individual happens to all.¹³ In *Going Down River Road*, Mwangi depicts a Kenyan society that that has been eroded of this value for human life. In the novel, Ocholla represents the many brutal murderers in the society. In this society, murder is no strange occurrence, even when it happens between friends. Ocholla and Onesmus conspire to kill Ben due to a past grudge at their army days. The two have lost all respect for human life. Largely, this distress that individuals undergo emanates from the destructive nature of unchecked capitalistic society that Kenya has become, as depicted in the novel.

Within the African community, families are regarded highly as being sacred. Hence, family members, particularly the father ensures that the family's needs are addressed. Furthermore, a father or mother is not advised to abandon a household's underpinnings. Nevertheless, with the advent of modernity, and the trend of ceaseless rural-urban migration, family responsibilities have been watered down. In the novel, Ocholla abandons his family back at home, and whenever he remembers them, he abuses his two wives as 'bitches,' and perceives them as a bother due to his abject poverty. Subsequently, he resorts to drinking alcohol on a daily basis.

Reading *Going Down River Road*, Kehinde posits that Ocholla's desertion of his family in the village to seek personal welfare in the city shows the dehumanizing effects of poverty.⁵ Similarly, Aisha notes that socio-economic deprivation causes alienation, as the characters in *Going Down River Road* illustrate in their attitudes to fellow humans.²² For instance, Ocholla considers his wives as "bitches," "criminals," "gangsters," and "little human animals".¹² His attitudes are further shown in the passage below:

'It is me, Kamau,' the cheerful voice answers. What do you want? Open up!' Have friends... friends for you...The sweaty workmate pushes the creaking door open, squeezes into the hut. Then he smiles and steps aside to let Ocholla's visitors pass. 'Mother...' Ocholla begins to swear and leaves the rest unsaid. His face turns a dusty grey hue, his eyes popping out. The abandoned mouth hangs loose, exposing half-chewed *Sukuma Wiki*. One woman has a load on her head, one on the back and a baby round her chest. She stoops around a while before finding a place to deposit her luggage. At her heels comes another older woman carrying two babies, one round her chest, and the other on her back. Then follows a party of little boys and girls of all sizes, ages, and all totting a little bundle of something or the other.¹²

This family encounter displays elements of inhumanity in Ocholla. He loathes his wives and children for visiting him without notice. From an African social point of view, a father is a symbol of love and protection for his family. In fact, naturally and culturally, a father ought to be excited to meet his family, especially when he has not seen his family in while. On the contrary, Ocholla is emotionless when he meets his family. It seems

the vagaries of the city life has taken away his fatherly affection. He shows no emotion towards his wives as well. He resents them openly. Examining Ocholla's character, it is not surprising that Jones concurrently posits that Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* portrays urban slum dwellers as people who are lowly regarded degraded.¹⁷

African Humanism in *The Cockroach Dance*

Meja Mwangi's *The Cockroach Dance*²³ mirrors the human experience of persons in Kenya sixteen years after independence. It is during this time that Kenya is beginning to show signs of industrialization, maximized capitalism and increased social change. The novel describes a modern Kenyan community in which the masses seem dehumanized. For instance, there are the tenants of Dacca House who wallow in poverty and disillusionment. Additionally, Kurtz also insists that *The Cockroach Dance* has urban settings associated with urban problems such as overcrowding, joblessness and disillusionment, which have bred masses – the faceless ones – who manifest inhumane traits.¹¹ Furthermore, it is argued that *The Cockroach Dance* is metaphorically written to reflect the extent to which poverty has dehumanized the poor masses in society.¹⁴

Naturally, all human beings feel comfortable when treated with respect and when their dignity is recognized. Unfortunately, the fictionalized Kenyan society in *The Cockroach Dance* pictures an environment of disillusioned individuals, which is an accurate representation of the majority of Kenyans. The mechanic, famously nicknamed 'the bathroom man', is exposed as man so impoverished that he lives in the bathroom. Together with his wife and mentally handicapped child, he lives in this bathroom. His living conditions are demeaning and dehumanising. Mwangi uses the Bathroom Man to show how urbanization, capitalism and materialism benefit only the rich, like Tumbo Kubwa. The poor such as the Bathroom Man wallow in embarrassing and depriving poverty.

The life of the Bathroom Man contradicts the *Utu* notion of upholding the dignity of human beings. Ticha also asserts that the importance of money cannot be ignored as it determines whether or not one lives a comfortable and dignified life.¹⁴ The bathroom is a place for showering and not for habitation. As the writer vividly paints this:

The bathroom, unlike the other rooms had no admirers, so, while everyone else was shoving and wrangling for the bigger rooms, the mechanic, his wife and child quietly crept down the yard and settled in the bathroom long before most tenants had set foot in the large rooms, the mechanic had already acquired a new personality., he had become the bathroom man. Only Dusman had paid any attention as the bathroom family moved in. He watched in amazement as man and wife crammed themselves into the cell-like room, first the reluctant sorry possessions, then their bodies and souls. Dusman sat for a long time by the window and stared mouth agape with suspense as the bathroom man forced their rickety bed into the room. He sat for close an hour as they twisted the bed this way and that and finally sawed off the legs to make it shorter.²³

This is a disclosure of how the mechanic, who formerly lived in a ramshackle hovel, now prefers to live in a bathroom, which he finds more comfortable. The Bathroom Man is portrayed as a victim of dogged poverty, leading to a state of hopelessness and animalization. His decision to move to an "unsightly bathroom" deprives him of the human respect and the dignity that befits the other residents of Dacca House, like Dusman. The mechanic's indifference to what others think of and about him depicts him as a sub-human, a state that degrades and animalizes him. His situation best illustrates how poverty contributes to the debasement of persons in Kenya.²⁴ Besides, in the opinion of Awitor, Dusman sees the Bathroom Man as an individual who has betrayed his masculinity, his very manhood by bringing his faithful wife and baby to live in a bathroom by the trashcans.²⁴ Moreover, Dusman describes the Bathroom Man as 'a dark bathroom man like a slimy black African toad'.²³

In *The Cockroach Dance*, the landowner, Tumbo Kubwa, is a representation of the rich few in society. He is depicted as a character that is inhumane. He is ruthless, arrogant and exploitative. Mwangi graphically chronicles Tumbo Kubwa's character as follows:

Tumbo Kubwa was one of the first Africans ever to open his eyes after the long slumber induced on the natives by colonialism. As soon as he realized that winds of change and fortune were flowing hard, he unfurled his creased sails and struck out into the future of property investment... He paid Kachra Samat in hard cash... That same day, Tumbo Kubwa moved in with a group of freelance carpenters, masons and plumbers picked off street corners and from low-class bars in town... They set to work partitioning the flat. The bigger rooms were partitioned with cardboards to make more rooms. By the time they had finished, Kachra Samat's connection doors were all nailed shut. Each room was a complete private entity with some sort of a window and door, and worth at least three hundred shillings a month.²³

The above passage reveals how the consequences of colonialism have affected the humanity of the bourgeoisie in society. Tumbo is a capitalist and a selfish exploiter who demeans and degrades other fellow

humans by soliciting high rents from the tenants. He reduces normal rooms into prison-like cells. His behaviour negates the African notion of 'I am because we are'.⁶ Tumbo's wealth comes from the impoverishment of his subjects. Shockingly, it is revealed that the Bathroom Man is in fact a distant relative of Tumbo Kubwa, yet Tumbo also expects him to pay house rent.

Tumbo Kubwa is an individual at the periphery and values money more than the lives of people. He is not in touch with the essence of being humane or community. Khomba avers that African humanism entails the significance and value of a person in society.⁸ Tumbo's oppression of the tenants of Dacca House presents him as a bourgeoisie-capitalist, who is interested in making maximum profit without minding the welfare of the 'have nots'.¹⁹ In the novel, Tumbo represents the privileged class in society – 'the haves' – who use their position to suppress and oppresses the masses.

Although Dusman is at times shown as being humane and acting as the voice of the poor in the novel, he too displays inhumane characteristics. This is especially evidenced by the way he loathes others in the text. For instance, he detests and is disgusted by the Bathroom Man so much so that he (Dusman), at one point, attacks him in the middle of the night. It is abnormal and dehumanizing for Dusman to intrude the premises of the Bathroom Man at such weird moments of the night. Inevitably, this hostility robs Dusman of his self-respect and dignity. He also he harasses other tenants at night:

'It is after midnight.' Toto reminded him Midnight, my ass.' Dusman slowly hauled himself up. I will rouse the bastard. He owes me too much money. 'No, don't,' Toto got up to restrain him. I believe you, I really do.' Dusman Shoved him back down with one mighty thrust... 'Bathroom man,' he bellowed his voice hoarse with the effort. 'Come out of that hole you hide your manhood in.'...He banged on the bathroom door and called obscenities to the occupants within. Light came on inside the room. 'Who is it?' a subdued voice called. Open up, you son of a monkey,' Dusman shouted. 'Want to talk to you....'²³

The above excerpt shows how tolerant, patient and humane the Bathroom Man, as he does not retaliate on the cruel utterances of Dusman. On the contrary, Dusman is also seen as being concerned for his neighbours in Dacca House. He acts as their spokesperson and voices their concerns over the living conditions at the House. When he fails convince Tumbo to consider improving the conditions of Dacca House, Dusman creates the Dacca House Manifesto, which Magendo baptizes as *coup de house*. This is to be given to the rent tribunal so that Tumbo Kubwa is compelled to provide better housing conditions for his tenants.

Ideally, Dusman is a frustrated individual who struggles to be humane in the midst of a society that is exploitative and oppressive to the poor. His pent-up anger emanates from his suppressed rebellion against the hotel management ('the haves'). The same anger springs up violently in him as evidenced by his passionate hatred for the Bathroom Man. This partly explains his irrational resentment for the Bathroom Man's family. After his unfair sacking from Sunshine Hotel, Dusman learns what it means to be innocently subjected to physical and mental torture. However, he transfers the same treatment to the Bathroom Man. Presumably, Dusman is a representation of persons who project their problems and disappointments on others, a trend that accelerates the decline of moral values in society.²⁵

The occupants of Dacca House in *The Cockroach Dance* are typical of persons in the modern Kenyan society who display inhumane behaviour. These characters are given typical names for symbolic purposes, for instance Sukuma Wiki (a type of vegetable or kale), Chupana Debe (bottles and can), Magendo (racketeering) and the Faceless Ones (those about whom very little is known). Each of these characters is a victim of the dehumanising environment. Firstly, Sukuma Wiki is a vegetable peddler with a wife and their horny-toed children.²³ Secondly, Chupana Debe is painted as an individual with marred self-esteem since. His room is likened to a heap of refuse and smells like trash:

Chupana Debe was busy sorting out the week's loot... He was a willowy old man. At least with sixty years old...He had every conceivable bottle in his collection: spirit bottles, wine bottles, cooking oil bottles, fruit juice bottles the whole lot. Apart from his beddings at the tinsmith kit...his room contained an incredible. Amount of rubbish and old bottles...his bed was also his workshop. The room was like a miniature private garbage dump, and smelt somewhere between a Clinic, a garage, a beer hall and real garbage dump.²³

In a stratified society, which Kenya is, little attention is paid to equal distribution of resources. As a result, while some individuals live lavish life, other live in a state of total depravity. The character of Chupana Debe in *The Cockroach Dance* has been reduced by poverty to an animalized state. Consequently, he is alienated and isolated from the other tenants of Dacca House. Having been socialized into crude individualism, he is mindless of those around him. This attitude negates Chupana Debe's attempt to feel part of a community that should assist him to overcome his problems. Anchoring on this aspect communalism, Lutz proclaims that African humanism enables people to understand that they are truly human, only in community with other persons.²⁶

Like Chupana Debe, Sukuma Wiki and his wife Vuta Wiki are poor. They depend on selling vegetables for their livelihood. As the author reveals: ‘Sukuma Wiki, a first offender, says he has tried to sell the parking metres in order to buy his wife a new dress and to renew his hawking license which had expired’.²³ Sukuma Wiki has lost his self-dignity. His act of stealing out of desperation still portrays him as a person who is hopeless. He is nonetheless resilient, as he struggles to survive regardless of his circumstances.

III. CONCLUSION

The depiction of African humanism in Meja Mwangi’s novels has been done simultaneously through the characters and characterisation strategies. In these novels, characters are portrayed as the products of the society in which they live. This society has suffered due to the consequences of classism, colonial and neo-colonial influences, capitalistic agenda, the forces of globalization and urbanization. Therefore, in his novels, Mwangi demonstrates how the Kenyan society is fast losing grip of its traditional African values, which are embedded in African humanism. There is a general decline of *Utu* in Kenya. This decline is manifest in the prevalence of individualism, disillusionment, frustration, alienation, impoverishment, pain and suffering.

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