
IMPACT OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES ON AFRICAN HUMANISM: A STUDY OF SELECTED NOVELS OF MEJA MWANGI

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ABSTRACT: *African humanism is conceptualised in the idea of Ubuntu. This term embodies various values that are uniquely African, culturally and conservatively. They include communalism, sharing, openness, respect for life and the upholding of the dignity of persons, and the devotion to family ties. The research examined the status of African humanism in Kenya as represented in selected popular fiction works of Meja Mwangi, namely Kill Me Quick (1973), Going Down River Road (1976) and The Cockroach Dance (1979). Based on the study, this paper presents and discusses the findings on how social structures affect individuals' sense of African Humanism in the selected novels. The study was qualitative in approach, employing analytical research design in the collection and analysis of data. Qualitative data was collected using content analysis. The study population comprised African popular fiction, with special focus on popular novels by Kenyan popular writers. The study narrowed down the population to 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 mentioned above. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources through close textual reading. Data analysis was conducted by the guidance of Marxist theoretical framework. The collected data was categorised along the study's units of analysis. It was established that different social structures such as government agencies, including the police and prisons, as well as private entities, such as employers and residential systems, have contributed to the decline in individuals' commitment to the values of African humanism in the selected novels. The study is significant since it unravels the humane dispositions of individuals as portrayed in popular fiction, a reflection of the humane status of ordinary people in Kenya of today. The study reveals that literary writers, such as popular fiction authors, are increasingly voicing the impact of changing social structures on African humanism in society today. The presence of social classes in the modern Kenyan state is inevitably affecting the utu of individuals. As such, instances of exploitation, poverty, inequality, and dehumanization are rampant.*

KEYWORDS: Impact, Social Structures, African Humanism, Novels, Meja Mwangi

INTRODUCTION

The advent of western civilisation in Africa, which resulted from the introduction of western education, religions and colonization of Africa by Europeans, saw the disruption and erosion of African traditional cultural values. These values were embedded in the concept of *Ubuntu*, which embodies ideals of communalism, respect for the rights of others and the upholding of the dignity of every individual. In place of these values, western civilisation introduced values that are rooted deeply in individualism and classism. Consequently, this paper examines how social structures affect African humanism based on a study of selected popular fiction by Meja Mwangi. The Marxist standpoint, as expounded by Eagleton (cited in Bressler, 2007, p. 201-205) as well as Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha's perspectives on Post-colonialism, are utilized in this analysis. Besides, some aspects of critical works by Odhiambo (2007, 2008) and Kehinde (2004) are also generally referred to as points of clarity and emphasis. For instance, a review on hybridity by Odhiambo (2013) is significant since she articulates the interaction between African natives and white colonizers. This is because the interaction between the colonized and colonizers has bred neo-colonialism, which is reflected in the social structures of Kenya today. Neo-colonialism has continued to oppress majority of the poor African people. Meanwhile, the influence of colonialism has remained embedded in the African way of life until today.

Governance in traditional African systems was a product of consensus. The governing systems ensured that humanness (*Ubuntu*) and mutually fulfilling relationships remained the key source of healthy communities. However, the forces of globalization and urbanization have led to the diminishing of *Ubuntu*, especially among the young generations (Mokgoro, 1997, p. 363-364). In response to the changing social and cultural trends in Africa, literary writers use literature, particularly novels, as a weapon to chronicle postcolonial classism and decadence within the current Kenyan environment (Kehinde, 2004, p. 228). Kehinde, in his study of Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* (1973), avers that it is in this novel that Mwangi concentrates on the perennial tension among individuals, as manifested in social classes. Evidently, the arising problems in the reflected society indicate a decline in the championing of the essence of African humanism in the current Kenyan society. Furthermore, Kehinde (2004) declares that Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* (1976) describes how the privileged class (politicians and the military) have inflicted social and economic hardships on the impoverished masses (the low class).

An African society that is characterised by classism contradicts an authentic human community that Tutu (1999) asserts to be truly one, a society that encourages hospitality, compassion and generosity. In his novels, Mwangi unravels how the inhuman conditions affect the lives of individuals. According to Awitor (2013, p. 65), Mwangi intentionally employs a revolt against the exploitation institutionalized by the faceless ones (privileged rich few) to describe the disparity between the poor and rich in the current Kenyan (global) community. This implies that the modern society has continued to undermine the significance of African humanism as presented through characters in the novels. Therefore, this paper discusses the impact that social structures have on the (African) humanism / humanness of characters in the texts *Kill Me Quick* (1973), *Going Down River Road* (1976) and *The Cockroach Dance* (1979).

This paper is based on the presumption that literature mirrors society, specifically people's human experience. Broadly, social structures may include prison and prisoners, social classes, organizations, peer groups, family, among others. These social structures have an immense impact on individuals, hence any alteration or change in society automatically affects people's lives. Therefore, literature captures and reflects these changes, which disrupt the personality or rather the *utu* disposition of the characters.

Mbigi (1997) argues that people interact in a collective way in order to achieve specific goals, since they represent the core values necessary for creation of a collective culture, founded on survival, solidarity, respect, compassion and human dignity. As such, this discussion focuses on the social structures, which include: public offices, drinking bars/hotels, work places, gang groupings, family, stinking back streets, police and prison among others. For instance, in *Going Down River Road*, the social structures include Wini's temporary family with Ben, Ben's friends (Ocholla, Mbugua among others), Development House, Ocholla's shack, and Karara alcohol centre. Meanwhile, social structures in *The Cockroach Dance* are Dacca house, sunshine hotel, Nairobi Municipal council, the drinking dens, Dr. Patel's hospital among others.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Structures and African Humanism in *Kill Me Quick*

When Meja and Mwangi leave their homes to seek employment in the big city of Nairobi, they are portrayed as innocent and highly moral. They are very keen to avoid being victimized by the police, especially along the main streets. For instance, Meja, one of the protagonists in *Kill Me Quick*, is astounded by the kind of people he encounters in the new environment, the city of Nairobi:

Meja looked this way and that and tried to hide his confusion. He had been in the city for three days and he had not liked anything about it. The busy indifferent people, the multiple of vehicles and the huge buildings had all filled him with fear. To him it all seemed like a new strange world away out of the universe where every other human being was a rival every car a charging beast and every building a mysterious castle. The idea of staying in this heartless place was terrifying, but then so was the idea of going back home without having found that job he came to seek (Mwangi, 1973, p. 3).

Indeed, Meja's encounter with urban dwellers reveals how contemporary development of urban centres has interrupted the relative peaceful and humane environment of a past Africa. In addition, Meja's dislike for the city shows a contrast that exists between the rural and urban societies in Kenya. Naturally, humans feel delighted and accepted by fellow human beings if they are accorded recognition. On the contrary, the busy indifferent people Meja encounters are chronicled as cold, individualistic, unfriendly, and lacking the *Ubuntu* spirit of "I am because we are". From this excerpt, it is established that the new community that Meja just joined is stratified into classes compared to his rural home. This suggests that Meja's family, and society, have socialized him to uphold humanness, given the fact that he sees these people as heartless. The extract above is typical of urban places such as Nairobi, where the *utu* of people is erased by harsh experiences of life arising from the strained economic resources of the majority poor. Assertively, this is a practice of 'survival for the fittest,' portraying these city-dwellers as indifferent to others. This proclamation

agrees with what Kehinde (2004) declares regarding Maina and Meja's experience in the city in *Kill Me Quick*:

Actually, when Meja and Maina find their rural community too myopic and claustrophobic for their job-seeking souls, the Nairobi city suddenly drags them to its bosom. There they become victims of dehumanization and gross exploitation. They are "foreigners" in the cities, aliens to coterie of Kenyan bourgeoisie, misfits to their families and pariahs to the society at large: In their rural settings, life is peaceful; people go about their daily chores without hurry. The rural society therefore, signifies satisfaction, filial love and neighbourly human feelings (p. 232).

Kehinde's (2004) argument above demonstrates the dreadful decay and loss of human values among, especially, the youthful members of the Kenyan society who cannot find gainful employment and have to live a very disillusioned life. By extension, this is an indication of the deterioration of African traditional values of humanism, which partly challenges efforts towards cohesion in Kenya today.

Public offices have also disoriented in the modern Kenya. Public service employees are unfriendly, cruel and brutal to fellow workers or job seekers. For instance, when Meja and Maina come to the modern city of Nairobi, they are startled by the kind of reception they encounter from the office employees. The inconsiderate and impatient managers order that they be thrown out of their offices by bouncers (Kehinde, 2004, p. 233). Meja particularly encounters the cruelty of the public offices when the managers do not listen to him or even look at his academic qualification, or at least acknowledge his desperation to find decent living. He is dumbfounded when the messenger abandons him after showing him a door with the writings: 'NO VACANCY. HUKUNA KAZI' (Mwangi, 2004, p. 6).

The inhumane treatment these youths receive is a reflection of how public institutions contribute to the erosion of African humanism in contemporary Kenya. The demands of a person's family drive an individual into a haunting experience of restlessness. Meja and Maina are haunted and bothered by the expectations of their family members. Presumably, this is the reason they hang onto the inhumane living conditions, especially the backstreets where these two protagonists live. This is revealed when they converse about their lives in the backstreet and the unending search for jobs as narrated by the writer:

My father made no secret of this, He told me, Meja. He did and was serious about it. I took my share of his wealth with my education...It would be cheating if I went back because the others did not go to school... They would not want me back there even though they might not say it. I would only increase their misery (Mwangi, 1973, p. 32).

This is a disclosure of how families as social structures contribute to the loss of individuals' *utu*. For instance, Maina has given up on the pursuit of a dignified life. He instead lives in the backstreet of Nairobi city. As such, he now competes for food with mongrels and sleeps in the refuse bins. From this conversation with Meja, Maina portrays his resigned state to any fate that might befall him. He is among the degraded masses who labour for the rich few – the privileged of the upper class in society, who reciprocate their services with meagre pay, which does not grant these youths

descent lives. The poor financial status of these characters' families forces them to live in dehumanizing conditions. Similarly, Ticha (2013) also contends that:

Maina's father has an erroneous worldview that originates from the belief that education and city life are automatically rewarding and that the family in rural areas should reap the rewards of education and city life as they imagine are embodied in their offspring and siblings. The dissonance between expectations and reality is seen as a situation that separates families in the fictional Kenya setting (p. 181).

Meja and Maina have struggled throughout life to fulfil their families' needs, while risking decay of their dignity and integrity as human beings (Lara, 1998). These young people symbolically represent the Kenyan youths of today. Majority of the Kenyan youths migrate to cities in search of jobs to help their families improve their economic status or to try and scale up the ladder of the social classes. Therefore, families as social structures, play a major part in fostering humanness in their members. The various demands from their families drag Meja and Maina into desperation. For instance, when Meja goes back home, fear and his impoverished state of life overwhelm and scare him, so that he collapses. When he regains consciousness, out of shame and frustration, he flees back to the urban environment without seeing his parents. On the other hand, Maina also fails to know the whereabouts of his parents since out of poverty they sell their land and migrate to an unknown dwelling place. This particular discovery that irritates Maina to a degree of committing murder (he kills two people in the village who refuse to accord him shelter). Therefore, the unfulfilled dreams of these youths further distance them from their families. Their experience contribute to the decline of humane feelings for others.

Moreover, Maina and Meja are further subjected to misery and torture at the white man's farm. First, at the farm, the two are given two huts that are degrading because they are poorly constructed and maintained, as described by Mwangi (1973):

Meja's hut was flea-land, and the whole circular wall practically plastered with bed bugs. The floor lay as when it was first created with the rest of the world, rough, corrugated and at least a foot deep in the dust. Evil black soot hung from the roof like giant stalactites, so heavy that the thatching was caving in. It seemed the builder had been unable to make his mind which of the two openings to make the door and which one the window, for the window was much wider and taller than the floor (p. 19).

The white man's farm is designed to oppress and degrade, to humiliate and demean, the casual workers like Meja and Mwangi. Such absurd and frustrating working conditions dissipate the humanity of the workers. In contrast, the white man's residence is sophisticated and comfortable for the white man and his family. Therefore, the separation of the living premises in the white man's farm is symbolic of the forces that thwart the thriving of African humanism. The two separate residential arrangements in the white man's farm also reveal a deep gap between the rich few and poor majority in post-colonial Kenya. The white man is a representation of the rich, 'the haves', who discriminate against the proletariats, 'the have nots'. According to Fanon (cited in Bressler, 2007, p. 239), such social stratifications constitute a process of 'othering,' a process that divides society into 'us' and 'others'. Presumably, before the white man's eyes, workers like Meja and Maina have no human value except in the accomplishment of their duties in the farm (Kula,

2016, p. 57). The white man's arrogance, exploitative and classist nature leads to the dehumanisation and degradation of these youths.

Secondly, the white man's farm manager, the foreman, is a representative of the oppressive social structure – the white man's farm. The foreman inflicts hunger and starvation on Meja and Maina by reducing their food rations. Furthermore, the foreman is used to depict the farm owner as unjust, merciless, tyrannical and oppressive. He monitors the African workers all the time and does not want them to rest as they go about their daily duties on the farm. Moreover, through the foreman, the owner of the farm subjects Maina and Mwangi to harassment all the time by decreasing their milk and flour rations:

'We...' Meja, started to say, but the accusing look on Maina's face stopped him. Their employer missed this though. 'As I was saying,' he went on. 'The foreman is giving you too much to eat. You are both on half- ration already. You are going on half-pay as well.' He laughed, exposing rows of white teeth and a red mouth. The rolls of blubber round his neck danced vigorously like rings of necklaces (Mwangi, 1973, p. 28).

By choosing to be silent and resigned, these youths contribute to the demeaning of their lives as workers. There is a clear portrayal of how their self-esteem and dignity decline as induced by the merciless and callous farm manager. Maina and Meja continue to be lost in abject poverty that increasingly enshrouds them as their attempts to secure jobs befitting their excellent academic grades fail. The society in which Meja and Maina live is characterized by overwhelming disparity between the dominant, privileged exploiter class and the exploited (Kehinde, 2004, p. 234). Furthermore, Kehinde rightly adds that the characters in *Kill Me Quick* represent a contemporary class of people in the current Kenyan society who groan under deplorable food crisis.

The pain, suffering and disillusionment that these young characters go through compel them to join the gang of Razor (a criminal gang leader) in order to survive. It is during this time that Maina's innocence shifts and deteriorates. He becomes completely criminalized as he immerses himself in pick-pocketing and robbery. Undeniably, the gang with which Maina teams up is a social structure that negatively influences his sense of humanity. Initially, Maina has been avoiding crime by remaining at the backstreets, a show of his sense of innocence and humane disposition. However, his eventual resort to criminal activities reveals the eventual decrease of his humanity, dignity. It is no surprise that he willingly accepts the enticement of Razor to join the life of crime, as graphically narrated by Mwangi (1973):

Life in the gang was an uphill job for Maina for at least the first few weeks. He had to learn from scratch what it took to keep alive and out of prison and still eat and drink. He had to learn the tricks one by one: all the tricks he had feared to try before he lost himself among the backstreets and dustbins. He was taught how to pick pockets, pick wrist watches and snatch without causing stampede in the crowded mainstream. He learnt how to open closed windows and doors with eyes closed and also how to carry off a whole wash-line plus the washing while the owner was...Most of his theory was taught by the experienced Razor himself assisted by the Crasher who seemed very well informed about the Petty little tricks that kept the light in the little hut burning (p. 66).

The transformation of the life of Maina, an intelligent youth with Division One in his university grades, is largely a result of disillusionment and alienation in a society that is increasingly stratified into classes of “haves” and “have nots” (Bressler, 2007). Ticha (2013) describes the present-day Kenyan society as one characterized by sustained or chronic deprivation of resources, poor choices, insecurity and power struggles.

Meja Mwangi also depicts the police and prisons as elements in society that dehumanize individuals. In his fiction, Mwangi centres on characters (prisoners) who ironically delight in going back to prison all the time as described in *Kill Me Quick*. This is the reason this novel is described by Kehinde (2004) as “a public parade of crime and social alienation, and an internal re-colonization, in which certain privileged individuals oppress their compatriots” (p. 234). Indeed, the rich and privileged few no longer share their resources with the majority poor.

A healthy community is one that espouses the values of African humanism which ensure that no member is dehumanized, alienated and deprived. In this regard, critics of African humanism such as Teffo (1998) argue that moral decay is mainly characterized by a cycle of violence and criminality, which has plagued present-day societies, threatening the foundations of morality. For instance, the prisoners’ sense of *utu* gets damaged and fades as Maina, Meja and other inmates repeatedly get jailed, viciously going back to the prison. Therefore, prison is portrayed as a social structure that no longer provides effective services in rectifying broken individuals. In fact, prisons seem to harden the commitment of the inmates to the life of crime. However, that these youths find comfort in the harsh conditions of the prison in Cell 9 is an indication that their immunity to prison life springs from the selfish nature of the contemporary urban community in which they live. The urban environment has refused to offer Maina and Meja the basic needs of food and shelter. In this case, the prisoners delight in their criminal enterprises and enjoy recounting stories of how they robbed, killed or harassed others:

They all seemed happy and contented with life in prison. He wondered whether he might eventually come to like it too. If all one did in prison was eat and drink and get himself locked up and counted like cattle, things were not very bad. At least that was better than living a quarry and burrowing in the rock for the rest of one’s life (Mwangi, 1973, p. 140).

The assumption that prison life is a normal human condition by these two characters is an indictment against a morally decayed Kenyan society. It shows that the society in which these youths are raised is socially and morally worse than the prisons. Nevertheless, the above episode shows that prison is a social structure that can influence inmates’ lives either positively or negatively. As such, Maina, Meja and the other inmates find shelter and food in the prison, a revelation that this social structure helps the grouped guests of the state find recognition and comfort from fellow inmates. In a way, this is a show of, ‘I am because we are’ – *utu* spirit that is alive among inmates. Indeed, these inmates portray care and love for one another that ought to be shown in the society.

Social Structures and African Humanism in *Going Down River Road*

In *Going Down River Road*, Meja Mwangi presents real situations in which individuals are marginalized, especially those at the periphery of the social environment like slums. By nature of their lives, the masses in these places are portrayed as destitute, impoverished, helpless and

disillusioned. The author aptly depicts a society split in terms of wealth possession. In referring to *Going Down River Road*, Kehinde (2004) also argues that:

This novel is a poignant tale of oppression and human degradation, specifically, in the mid-1970s in Kenya, which was one of the worst periods of economic, social and cultural dislocation in the nation...It takes as its subject some of the most downtrodden, oppressed and exploited people in Kenyan society (p. 228).

At the beginning of the novel, Mwangi draws attention to various groups of workers along Grogan Road and the type of businesses in which they are engaged. For instance, the reader's attention is drawn to the presence of: unlicensed roadside cobbler, clerks, hawker of vegetables, refuse collectors, mechanic, retired whores and the like. Arguably these individuals form an environment of the disillusioned and alienated masses in contemporary Kenya (Kehinde, 2004, p. 24). Perhaps the low income they generate from these daily small businesses uncovers the desperation, gloom, abandonment and alienation that is characteristic of the current Kenyan society that is affected by class stratification. Consequently, these classes are contributing to the erosion of the *Utu* spirit of "I am because we are."

Furthermore, the casual workers of the Development House are portrayed as being vulnerable to harsh working conditions. They are poorly remunerated and they work from dawn to late evening each day. Therefore, employment as a social structure has destroyed the workers' humanity. The writer focuses on the working situation of the labourers to show the exploitation they go through:

There were different job classifications on the site. The highest placed were masons and carpenters, a mixture of Asians and a few Africans who did the specialized jobs. There are the electricians who just hung around and made sure the sockets and switches were taken care of... There were the lorry drivers who spent most of time riding in and out of compound...The labourers' class constituted majority of the people on the site. Ben and Ocholla belonged to this group. They did nothing except stick around and do as they were told...Being a manual labourer one was not expected to have any initiative...Just hang around, look absurd but do as you are commanded...at the end of the month file to the wooden office near the site gate and beg for your pay (Mwangi, 1976, p. 14).

The Development House belongs to a rich person (capitalist) whose intention is to make profit from the hotel while impoverishing the site workers. Assertively, these workers represent the masses who are engaged in providing labour to various institutions in Nairobi city. Presumably, such buildings are only affordable to the rich, the upper class capitalists. Therefore, it is ironical that these impoverished workers endure the demeaning working conditions with meagre pay, just to erect mansions for the rich who in turn pay them meagre wages. The owner of Development House, in this case, is symbolic of social structures that inflict hardships on the voiceless and resigned labourers. Interestingly, Development House automatically becomes a permanent source of capital for the rich owner, whereas the casual workers who constructed it languish in poverty. Therefore, the completion of this building marks the termination of the jobs of these casual labourers. Accordingly, these workers' misery and demeaned state is portrayed by Ben and Ocholla, the protagonists in *Going Down River Road*, who are ever drunk and impoverished.

In *Going Down River Road*, most of the characters (casual workers or the hands) spend most of their time in excess drinking and careless sex. This is a revelation of their frustration, alienation and disillusionment. The altered behaviour and personality of these characters reflects a Kenyan society where people engage in self-destructive lifestyles due to the widening gap between the rich and poor as a result of steep social stratification. It is arguable that the most expensive high-storey buildings in urban centres are built by the poor masses of least paid casual labourers. The exploitation of the masses is contrary to the values of African humanism which call for solidarity, respect for persons and compassion (Mbigi, 1997).

Drinking places like Karara Centre, Capricorn, among others, are social structures that have contributed to the deteriorating behaviour of the characters Ben and Ocholla in *Going Down River Road*. Indeed, Kehinde (2004) asserts that the contemporary society lacks the traditional virtues of socialism, which the African past was known for, particularly the act of equality that has been replaced with inequality. The two are further portrayed as characters that have underrated their dignity, self-esteem, humanity and integrity. They engage in degrading alcoholism and prostitution. These actions have escalated the decadence of their humane status, a situation that portrays them as distracted and disoriented members of society. Their frequent visits to drinking joints have impacted on their personality as they are portrayed as sub-humans. The writer shows the transformation of behaviour and personality in Ocholla who gradually develops animosity towards his wives:

Not for long, Ocholla erupts into violent rage, bangs his hammer fists on the table and stirs the whole bar to attention. "Bastards," he preaches. "All women are bastards. Children are sick, school fees are up, and they want new dress! Wives are animals, Ben. Children and dresses that is all they know. They are not getting anything from me anymore. Where do they think I am digging the money? Bitches..." (Mwangi, 1976, p. 71).

The above description reveals the frustrations and pains that Ocholla is experiencing due to the many unsolved problems of his family. He is impoverished despite being a sight-casual worker who is lowly paid. The little pay he receives is not enough to improve the lives of his family. Instead, it contributes to the collapse of family ties, as Ocholla abandons his family. In exploring the life of Ocholla in this manner, the author unravels how the Kenyan society has become overly individualistic, selfish and capitalistic. In such society, a father or husband would rather keep his measly earnings to himself than share with his family. Suggestively, Ocholla has become animalized as he develops hatred towards his own family. He hurls abuses at his wives carelessly, even in the bars where he socializes with other workmates. Consequently, the drinking venues like *Karara Centre* are social structures that intensify the deterioration of basic human respect as one of the values of African humanism.

The character of Ben is also used to show the impact of social structures on the commitment to African humanism in *Going Down River Road*. When Ben meets Wini, a secretary and a commercial sex worker, he excitedly and comfortably establishes a marital relationship with her. Wini has a son, Baby, who shares no blood relationship with Ben. Their stay together does not last long as Wini soon deserts Ben for another man, Mr. Caldwell, a rich man. However, she leaves her son with Ben. Perturbed by all that has happened, Ben loses control of his life. Meanwhile, the

little social structure that had formed in the form of a family made up of Ben, Wini and the son Baby has collapsed. Wini's departure from this group greatly affects Ben and Baby who henceforth are rendered demoralized, and disillusioned as brought out in the text:

"Oh, Winifred, you mean, that Mr. Caldwell's girl, the pretty little woman?'...She left,' the man informs him, 'with Mr. Caldwell. I heard he was going to marry her.' Ben's heart falters. Sweat breaks out all over his skin. His head throbs painfully. He supports himself on the desk with his large corny knuckles. 'Did...did she Leave a message for...for me?'...He grabs the envelope and staggers out of the office. The corridor appears suddenly dim. His legs feel heavy, lifeless. People float by him like ghosts. His head spirals in impossible, sickening loops. He totters into the men's toilet. Feverish tremor shakes his body... Tears stream down his cheeks...He crumples the cheque for one thousand shillings and together with the letter hurls them into the lavatory bowl and flushes the water (Mwangi, 1976, p. 128-129).

Initially, Wini is portrayed as being humane. She shows great care for Ben and Baby. She is also generous and understanding as she willingly supports Ben financially and morally. For example, she gives pocket money to Ben, accommodates him in her single room and provides him with food and love. Secondly, as a mother, she willingly nurses her son, even though she conceives while indulging in prostitution. However, Wini soon metamorphoses as she inhumanely abandons Ben and Baby without much consideration for their plight. Before long, Ben does not manage to pay rent for this house when the proprietor locks him out. He loses his self-esteem and seeks for accommodation in Ocholla's small shack, inconveniencing the private personal space of his buddy, another sign of the loss of basic respect in society. Commenting on the above episode in *Going Down River Road*, Ticha (2013) posits that:

This is a tendency by the poor characters to engage in activities and attitudes that disrupt the cherished African values of *Ubuntu*. That friendship and all the exchange that go with it, like drinking together, talking, eating, sharing a cigarette end, lending each other money, and buying each other a drink-positive values of sharing that alleviate the impact of poverty in some poor communities are abused when members of the community move from these less personal forms of sharing to more intimate ones like sharing one's 'shanty hut'...Ben's intrusion or supposed inconsideration for the boundaries of sharing or in fact "betrayal and exploitation" of his friend's and perhaps of the traditional 'African' value of *Ubuntu* or humanity... (p. 44).

The worsening behaviour of Ben also impacts Ocholla negatively. Therefore, social structures such Ben's companionship with Wini (friendship) and close relationship with Ocholla lead to demoralization and lack of respect between friends. They lead to the erosion of humanness in both Ben and Ocholla. This erosion is evidenced by the fact that, from this moment onwards, Ben and Ocholla spend almost all their time drinking and entertaining commercial sex workers in bars and brothels.

Truly, this is a revelation of a modern capitalist Kenyan society, which has closed her eyes to the poor masses represented by Ocholla and Ben. Arguably, the presence of African humanism in a society is reflected through society's encouragement of the best in its evolution and the treatment of humankind (Egbunu, 2009). On the contrary, the society Mwangi portrays in *Going down River*

Road contrasts Egbunu's proclamation regarding a healthy authentic community, where members cherish the humanity of each other.

The large family of Ocholla (2 wives and children) is a bother to him. He keeps on referring to his family members as 'bitches' and 'bastards.' When Ocholla comes to Nairobi city, he hopes to secure a job to enable him fend for his family back at home, and have a decent life. However, he ends up impoverished to the extent of living in a degraded and humiliating shack in a shanty. Commenting on this situation, Kehinde (2004) also asserts that:

Ocholla, being a member of the psychologically and economically strangled class, decides to leave his family in the village. This is to suppress the trouble arising from the economic circumstances of his society. In the city, he becomes a dipsomaniac, sex maniac and vagrant. The scene of arrival of his large family from the village captures the trauma of a dehumanized being. He sees their visit as a burden and becomes downcast as soon as he sees the worn-out and underfed children and their mothers (p. 243).

Indeed, Kehinde's proclamation of realism in *Going Down River Road* highlights the characteristics of a declining African humanism in individuals. Consequently, the large family and its overwhelming demands are characteristic of a social structure that contribute to a distortion of Ocholla's dignity, integrity, self-respect and self-esteem. Furthermore, Ocholla is caught up in a twist of fate. He is portrayed as an estranged individual to his family and himself, as reflected by the social activities in which he engages. First, he intentionally kills Onesmus (driver of the truck at the Development House building). Second, he ceaselessly indulges in careless sex with women, and alcoholism at places like *Karara* centre.

Social Structures and African Humanism in *The Cockroach Dance*

The depiction of dehumanizing conditions in *The Cockroach Dance* is a revelation of a contemporary Kenyan society in which social structures compromise the humanity of individuals. To begin with, all humans are satisfied when accorded respect, and their dignity is recognized. On the contrary, the fictionalized Kenyan society in Mwangi's *The Cockroach Dance* presents lowly individuals, who are wallowing in abject poverty, and living in dehumanizing conditions. Their predicaments have distorted these individuals' humane dispositions. The author reveals that the mechanic – Bathroom Man – lives in a bathroom. His wife and a mentally handicapped child are also occupants of this bathroom. It is unrealistic for an individual to live in a bathroom, as the writer graphically narrates it:

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 larger 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 had watched in amazement as man and wife crammed 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 family forced their rickety bed into the room. He sat for close on an hour

as they twisted the bed this way and that and finally sawed off the legs to make it shorter (Mwangi, 1979, p. 156).

This dramatic episode portrays Dusman as an individual who has experienced pain and suffering. Subsequently, he has developed immunity to the opinions of other people about his actions and behaviour. Besides, he is resigned and struggles to uphold his dignity, self-respect and shame that go with putting up in a shanty place such as a bathroom. The idea of classism is prevalent here as Tumbo Kubwa delights in collecting rent from the tenants while exploiting them. Tumbo even induces his tenants to unbearable filthy conditions within Dacca House such as a blocked toilet, wet-peeling painted walls, and rooms that are infested with cockroaches, mice among other predatory household pests. Commenting on this scenario in the novel, Awitor (2013) also posits that these dehumanizing conditions not only point to the poverty and the misery of the dejected, but also the laxness and the failure of the post-independence leaders in Kenya to live up to independence expectations of their fellow citizens.

In the light of the above observation, it is arguable that Tumbo Kubwa is a representation of the richest few individuals in contemporary Kenya. Most of these rich individuals use every means available to squeeze money from the poor masses. For instance, Tumbo Kubwa collects rent from the Bathroom Man. Upon learning about this issue, Dusman confronts the property owner through a tenants' strike dubbed *coup de house*. Therefore, Tumbo Kubwa, the owner of Dacca House, is a type of social structure that influences other individuals' lives. For instance, the occupants of this building are already marginalized, isolated, alienated and downtrodden as evidenced by the Bathroom Man. This situation portrays a group of individuals who have lost their sense of humanity.

The Bathroom Man's decision to live in the bathroom also impairs with the humanness of his wife, and their mentally retarded child. They acquire a new name, 'the bathroom man's family. From then on, the bathroom becomes their habitation. As earlier revealed in the text, Bathroom Man's wife chooses to move into the bathroom:

There was no conceivable way they could fit in so small a space. But Dusman was proved wrong as, before his very eyes, spirit triumphed over matter, and between the two of them, the woman with the baby strapped to her back with a faded kitenge shawl, they did it ...moved into a bathroom (Mwangi, 1979, p. 156).

Hospitals contribute largely to a patient's change of attitude towards oneself and others. In *The Cockroach Dance*, Dr. Patel is a specialist veterinary doctor. Therefore, it is dehumanizing for him to disguise himself as medical doctor and administer treatment to human patients. As the writer narrates:

His first practice ever was along the new Grogan Road, which the coolies had just built after completing their railway line in a squeezed-up corner of Bombay House, a block away from Dacca House. He named it Dr. Patel K. Patel's Animal Hospital... There were no animals on Grogan Road since Indians did not keep dogs or pets of any kind then, and the Africans, who grazed herds of scrawny native cattle on the outskirts of the city, had no money to pay a veterinary surgeon... Circumstances had finally forced Dr. Patel to convert to human medicine... no white man would stoop so low to consult a coolie quack (Mwangi, 1979, p. 109-111).

Dr. Patel has engaged in tedious correspondence courses and six months of practical medicine at London School of Medicine. These programmes have helped him to acquire basic knowledge about human medicine. Despite being insufficient, he uses this meagre knowledge to start treating individuals such as Dusman, Felix, Anthony, Francis, Robert and Dan. Curiously, to all of these patients, he administers capsules, tablets and penicillin (Mwangi, 1979, p. 122). Assertively, it is inhumane for Dr. Patel to disguise himself and pose as an expert in treating human patients. In fact, his actions infringe on human rights (Kula, 2016), apart from violating moral values. Based on the above extract, Mwangi undeniably reflects a Kenyan society that is characterized by misplaced professionals in some sectors. These so-called professionals discharge duties in positions for which they are not properly trained, hence endangering people's lives.

The inability of Dr. Patel to offer reliable medical treatment to humans is disclosed when the patients he treats do not respond positively to the treatment he administers. It is no surprise that later, Dusman, his patient, is referred to Dr. Bates by the Nairobi City Council management (Mwangi, 1979, p. 121-125). On the contrary, Bates disapproves the ignorance of "the disguised Dr. Patel" by establishing the medical problem Dusman suffers from, the psychological torture, emanating from a given job, which he passionately dislikes. Bates is an attendant of parking metres, an occupation that has led to his disorientation, frustration and disillusionment.

Bates' condition portrays him as a paranoid individual, who is not in touch with himself, and those with whom he lives. This is revealed in his harsh, and domineering treatment of other tenants in Dacca House, namely Bathroom Man, Sukuma Wiki, Chupa na Debe, Megendo and the 'faceless ones' (those poorest individuals that are rarely seen). From a Marxist standpoint, this episode mirrors a Kenya nation that, through unfair means, deploys semi-skilled persons like Dr. Patel to render public services to the poor, leading to disastrous consequences. In *The Cocroach Dance*, the poor patients' lives are compromised for profit by a quack. Meja Mwangi, through Dr. Patel, Dusman and other characters like the Indians and Africans (mentioned in the novel [Mwangi, 1979, p. 109]), depicts hospitals (Patel's) as social structures that impact individuals' humanness. It is arguable that this episode portrays Dusman as a character dehumanized by the Municipal Council. The Municipal Council assigns Dusman the work of reading water metres, a job that he totally loathes, and an attitude that has also diminished his humanity.

Dusman is a former employee of Sunshine Hotel. However, he was fired due to the influence of his workmate, bootlicker Chacha, who is disliked by Dusman (Mwangi, 1979, p. 323). The misunderstanding at the workplace, Sunshine Hotel, piles up bitterness and hatred in Dusman who has since then been portrayed as a frustrated character. Additionally, Dusman gets a job with the Nairobi City Council as a water metre reader. Later, he is deployed as a parking metre attendant. It seems that Meja Mwangi is arguing that the shifting of work roles is prevalent in Kenya often seems to devalue the lives of workers, as evidenced by constant strikes in the public sector.

The social structures, in this case Nairobi City Council and Sunshine Hotel, amplify the worsening mental state of Dusman. He thus unreasonably moves to the Bathroom Man's house in the middle of the night to wake him up just to insult him terribly. These social institutions contribute to the deteriorating mental condition of Dusman. It may be asserted that Dusman is a representation of persons in Kenya who are oppressed by employers in the private and public sector. In fact, the author reveals that the Sunshine Hotel management unfairly sacked Dusman:

‘You remember that bootlicker Chacha? The guy who was pushing for your dismissal to please Whitehead.’ ‘How can I ever forget him?’ Dusman said bitterly. ‘He took over,’ the man said. ‘He seems to be doing pretty well too...They were used to being referred to as white men’s bootlickers, traitors, fairies, and every dirty word any drunk could remember in time (Mwangi, 1979, p. 323-124).

The resultant oppression and dehumanization of Dusman at Sunshine Hotel and subsequently Nairobi City Council renders him a disgruntled and animalized individual. This is shown when Dusman keeps complaining about the parking metres and the occupants of Dacca House, even during his medical examination by Dr. H.C.R. Bates (Mwangi, 1979, p. 123). Dr. Bates, the Nairobi City Council’s psychoanalyst, proclaims that Dusman is not himself. According to the doctor, Dusman has an unstable mental condition and, as such, further examination should be sought particularly in hospitals that deal with mental cases such as Mathari Mental Hospital.

In *The Cockroach Dance*, Meja Mwangi also highlights the brutality and ruthlessness of the cops (police) when dealing with suspects of crime and the state of lawlessness in society. Right from the start of the novel, Mwangi engages the reader in a exploration of the suffering, debasement, cruelty and inhumanity to which the impoverished residents of Dacca House are exposed. As a result of their maltreatment by the social structures that ought to cater to their needs, the residents of Dacca House engage in shady businesses. First, due to the biting state of poverty, Magendo Kali resorts to selling unlicensed, household stolen goods. Second, Sukuma Wiki smuggles ivory and at the same time, he is illegally found with parking metres, the property of Nairobi City Council. Thirdly, Charity, the sex commercial worker, is unlawfully involved in commercial sex business with Dusman during odd hours of the night, and unluckily, she is nabbed alongside Dusman. The writer narrates these stories to depict a Kenyan society whose social structures, such as the police, cater only to the privileged class, and subsequently dehumanise the less privileged.

CONCLUSION

In summation, Meja Mwangi, in his novels, depicts how social structures impact the humanness of individuals in the present-day increasingly capitalistic African society. Initially, before the colonization of the Africa, people practised mutual respect, upheld human dignity, practised equality, and sharing of property. However, colonialism bred crude individualism that is characterised by greed for materialism, and the struggle for power to control and manipulate others. These trends have given birth to division, and the formation of classes that are evident in the current Kenyan society. The studied texts also show how social institutions are increasingly avenues of dehumanization, given the fact that they are platforms for personal interactions. Ideally, social structures such as public offices, family, among others, are meant to help nurture the humanness of individuals. However, as Mwangi illustrates in his novels, these structures have also become the avenues for oppression and exploitation between groups.

This study is expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the values of African humanism and their application in the modern society. It demonstrates how more focus shifts to the content of popular fiction due to its representation of social reality that is vital in the field of

literature by increasing scholarship and research in general. The knowledge generated contributes to academic debate in the relevant field of research. Furthermore, the study is important because it focuses on popular fiction, literature that literary scholars generally pay less attention to.

The study is significant since it unravels the humane dispositions of individuals as portrayed in popular fiction, a reflection of the humane status of ordinary people in Kenya of today. The study reveals that literary writers, such as popular fiction authors, are increasingly voicing the impact of changing social structures on African humanism in society today. The presence of social classes in the modern Kenyan state is inevitably affecting the *utu* of individuals. As such, instances of exploitation, poverty, inequality, and dehumanization are rampant.

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