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## Use of Symbolism in Depiction of Humanism in Meja Mwangi's Novels

**Martha Flavian Ombati, Elizabeth Odhiambo**

### Abstract

African societies, emphasis is placed on oneness, sharing, hospitality and dignity that have continued to sustain humane interactions and co-existence. However, owing to social changes caused by modernity and globalization, social structures have changed hence influencing African Humanism. Therefore, this study analysed popular fiction to point out how authors use symbolism to portray African humanism focusing on Meja Mwangi's novels, Kill Me Quick (1973), Going Down River Road (1976) and The Cockroach Dance (1979). These novels constitute Mwangi's urban trilogy. The discussion was also reinforced using secondary data on humanism, specifically African humanism. The study was qualitative in approach, employing analytical research design in the collation and analysis of data. The gathered data was analysed through content analysis. The study population comprised Kenyan popular fiction, with a special focus on the 46 novels by Meja Mwangi. Purposive sampling technique was employed with the inclusion criterion being Mwangi's novels that address the humanistic issues being investigated. The sampled texts were Mwangi's three urban-based novels mentioned above. The data was collected from both primary and secondary sources through close textual close reading. Data analysis was conducted using a Marxist theoretical framework. Data collected was categorised along with the study's units of analysis, namely Mwangi's thematic concerns on humanism, characterisation, and narrative techniques. This study established that, in his trilogy, Meja Mwangi has vividly articulated the representation of humanism by employing symbolism, irony, contrast, epistolary technique and vivid description. The manipulation of such devices has enabled Mwangi to unravel the weakening of the 'value-laden African humanism' in post-independent Kenya and Africa at large. These devices have been discussed in-depth to show how their employment in the trilogy helps communicate the issue of capitalism and its influence on societal stratification, exploitation, oppression and alienation. The knowledge generated in the study is expected to help improve the quality of people's lives in a social environment, by realizing the essence of African humanism in fostering healthy relationships with the self and others in society.

**Keywords:** Symbolism, Humanism, Meja Mwangi, Novels.

### Introduction

The term 'humanism', also referred to as "human-beingism", means devotion to the interests of human beings by repudiating discrimination and re-affirming the spirit of cosmopolitanism, international friendship, goodwill and compassionate concern for fellow human beings throughout the globe (Azenabor, 2004). Azenabor further notes that humanism concerns itself with a goal of thoughtfulness, human feelings, behaviour and existence that the ancient humanist philosophers such as Protagoras, Socrates, Karl Marx, Engels and August Comte, among others, placed great importance on 'man.' For instance, Socrates commonly used such phrases as "man is the measure of all things" and "man know thy self." Azenabor concludes that humanism is a global and universal phenomenon that exists in all civilizations where persons and their ideas are the focus of active intellectual, religious, philosophical, historical, ideological, and artistic concern.

It has been argued that Africans are not one but many people and races with diverse cultural beliefs and traditions and they are tied together by a similar history of colonial yoke or tutelage (Egbunu, 2014). African humanism is also uniquely perceived and referred to variously by different groups - ethnicities /tribes - and regions of Africa, depending on the conception of such people (Khoza, 2006). African humanism is referred to as *Ubuntu*

(Southern Africa), maduka (Igbo - Nigeria), utu (East Africa), among other regions. The African people, particularly political leaders used the term Ubuntu to refer to African humanism within the African continent (Mbigi, 1997).

African humanism differs from the other types of humanism due to its focus on the aspects of the sacredness of human life, human relations, extended family, communalism, and respect for authority and elders (Kanu, 2017). In comparison, for instance, "Western humanism" is characterized by strict individualism, which encourages self-fulfilment in promoting personal material gains and welfare whereas African humanism encourages the best in the treatment of humankind and extolment of an individual's goodness as the purpose of all actions (Khoza, 2015). Besides, some features of African humanism are distinctly understood in African society and are not rooted in human nature (Lutz, 2009). Lutz holds that human nature is common to the entire human race and values such as utu ('personhood' in Swahili), should not be seen as African, but as global human values. Like any other type of humanism, African humanism is concerned with the welfare of an individual within a community since humanism is tradition-interwoven and community-based (Mbiti, 1991). In the same vein, both Rafapa (2006) and Mphahlele (2002) concur that African humanism is based on mutual relationships founded on the values of sharing, dignity, respect, and the betterment of human existence.

The colonisation of Africa and missionary work disrupted the African culture and communal living, hence, influencing the functioning of African humanism in society (Obee, 1999). Obee asserts that the Asians and Europeans who came to Africa for exploration, slave trade and colonization ruptured the essence of African humanism among the Africans. The greed for materialism and wealth by these Asians and Europeans sprung from the globe's change from a 'feudal system of power based on inherited wealth and status', to a 'capitalist system based on the ownership of private property' (Bresseler, 2011). According to Chinua Achebe, the four hundred years of Euro-African contact may be divided into three periods that encompass the time of slavery, colonization and decolonization (Achebe, 1964).

The issue of human solidarity in Kenya has been discussed by Kresse (2016) who bases his analysis on the notions of haki (justice) and usawa (equality), which are grounded in the conception of utu (morality or humanity). These concepts emphasize the need to be humane as a way of promoting healthy relationships that rejuvenate cohesion in society. Focusing on Abdilatif Abdalla's Kiswahili novel, *Sauti ya Dhiki* (1973) (translated as *Voice of Agony*), Kresse argues that Abdalla's political and poetic engagement seems to voice discontent in response to the violation of African humanism in Kenya. According to him, Abdalla's political sensitivity and moral consciousness work as mediating features in the process of expression. Moreover, such literary artists like Abdalla articulate a class struggle of persons in a capitalist environment due to inequality, exploitation and injustice in places such as prison, work place, and the like. This is because these institutions have issues of class divisions, gender discrimination, corruption, nepotism and so on. In reality, the function of African humanism in the post-independence society is controversial due to such rampant

societal disorders that writers of literature voice in their fiction. This is because African humanism, as an accepted philosophy among Africans, is meant to enable societal members to embrace oneness, sharing, and human dignity.

The trilogy by Mwangi, in this respect, deals with the gap between the rich and poor, traditional versus modern values, unemployment, urbanization, prostitution, crime and violence that have negatively influenced individuals' lives. The setting of the trilogy – *Kill Me Quick*, *Going Down River Road* and *The Cockroach Dance* – voices the problems, pain of neo-colonial Kenya and Africa as a whole as portrayed by the characters in his art. Luckacs (1971) also posits that great writers are those that depict typical characters and their struggle for self-realization without imposing any political orientation. Additionally, Mwangi's other works such as children's literature, drama, poetry and short stories have also grounded him on the literary scene. These works particularly the trilogy delineate societal ills earlier mentioned in the study, thereby contradicting the principles of African humanism that are key in exalting human dignity, self-worthiness and respect. It is no wonder that critics such as Kurtz (1998) and Barber (1987) celebrate popular fiction, particularly novels authored by Mwangi. This is because they hold that Mwangi articulates vital societal issues such as poverty and inequality that impact the lives of majority nationals in postcolonial Kenya.

This portrayal of societal challenges unravels the unfair treatment of the masses, yet they are the majority in a community. These impoverished persons expose high poverty levels due to the ever-increasing imbalanced allocation of economic resources. Focusing on this scenario, Marxists hold that with the unequal distribution of economic resources, there is bourgeoisie at the top, middle-level class of workers and those of the bottom - the lumpen proletariat who live in slums (Habib, 2005). Inevitably, this social disorder contravenes the African humanism aspects such as communalism, the sacredness of human life and healthy human relationships in a given African community (Kanu, 2017).

### Statement of the Problem

Within the traditional African social set-up, emphasis was placed on oneness, sharing, respect and human dignity all in the spirit of African Humanism. This ensured the upholding of harmonious relationships among Africans as reflected in mainstream African literature. However, because of social changes, human relationships have also changed, particularly in a socially stratified contemporary society. African popular fiction, which has attempted to capture this reality, is often dismissed as simplistic, targeting low-brow readers, generally being insignificant and unable to reflect human reality. Although many studies have been conducted on African popular fiction on one hand, and African humanism on the other, the link between the two remains unexplored. The current study analyses popular fiction in pointing out how socio-economic changes in independent Africa have impacted African humanism. This study, therefore, investigated portrayal of African humanism in Mwangi's trilogy, given that the society it focuses on is pervaded by social ills, which contradict the cultural values embedded in African humanism.

## Literature Review

Literature acts as an avenue for the preservation and transmission of cultural values. In this regard, artists aesthetically communicate to their audience/reader about social, moral, and political issues in their milieu that affect them either positively or negatively. It, therefore, follows that each author exhibits their unique style in conveying their subject matter. In this respect, style is defined as “a dress of thought” (Huemer, 2016, p. 195). Arguably, a text from a Marxist point of view should reveal the class conflict of a writer’s society through detailed analysis of symbols, images and other literary techniques (Habib, 2005).

Concerning Mwangi’s choice of language, Gikandi (1986) argues that Mwangi employs a journalistic style that offers scenes with the hard and sharp ear of a reporter on the beat. He notes that Mwangi manipulates authorial preference for details that inevitably result in unplanned symbolic structure focusing on unconsciousness of hopelessness. He moreover argues that Mwangi uses the American thriller language of writers like Raymond Chandler, Mickey Spillane and Chester Himes. Nevertheless, Ezeugo (2017) bashes Gikandi’s assertions by holding that Mwangi has effectively employed point of view, character and characterization as prime stylistic features to communicate societal sensitive issues to his readers. Ezeugo, thus, concludes that Mwangi has interchangeably utilized both first and third-person narrators and other devices rationally to convey the societal issues that affect individuals today in an urban locale. This study departed from Gikandi’s argument and built on Ezeugo’s assertions to examine how Mwangi’s use of style in the trilogy enables the articulation of the portrayal of African humanism in the Kenyan society.

In his study of misogyny, Etyang (2014) notes that Mwangi uses biblical allusion in portraying women characters such as Delilah in *Kill Me Quick*. He claims that the biblical story in Judges in the Bible’s Old Testament Chapter 13 verse 16 helps Mwangi to recreate the theme of betrayal whereby the female character, Delilah betrays her love relationship with Maina when she marries another man who promises her more comfortable life. Etyang further ventures into a scene in *Going Down River Road*, where there is an incident of “love betrayal” relationship between characters, Ben and Wini with the later deserting Ben for her rich boss, Mr. Caldwell, rendering Ben disillusioned. This study incorporated Etyang’s argument on the use of characterization and allusion as Mwangi’s strategies of themes exposition and further investigated how the use of other devices such as parallelism, among others effectively unravel vices like crime and class conflict that affect the humane dispositions of characters in the trilogy.

In his study of style in Mwangi’s *Going Down River Road*, Abdessalami (1989) argues that most critics have disapproving conclusions about this novel. He observes that they base their opposition on the assertion that this text is weak, pessimistic and does not give solutions to deplorable economic and social conditions of the neo-colonial epoch in Kenya about which he wrote. He posits that critics have not dealt with the stylistic aspect of the novel. Basing on this, Abdessalami avers that the novel has life characters, setting, and diction, apart from its unique depictive language. He further observes that the high-creative writing style of the work assists the writer to mirror the real state of

life of individuals in the poorest slum areas of Nairobi. He also notes that other figurative choices used in the text include metaphor, simile, irony, synecdoche and imagery, among others, which have given the novel its artistic merit as a literary text. He concludes that the text has detailed descriptions, which appeal to body senses, a show of Mwangi’s artistic skills. Abdessalami’s arguments concerning the style in Mwangi’s novel negates the criticism by critics regarding Mwangi’s use of style, criticism like “his work is uneven and imitative of western styles” (Wanjala, 2007, p. 240). The current study departed from Wanjala’s assertion, built on Abdessalami’s, and proceeded to explore the effectiveness of Mwangi’s novelistic literary techniques in depicting African humanism in his trilogy.

In the same vein, Busolo (1986) evaluates stylistic devices in *Kill Me Quick* and observes that Mwangi employs symbolism to show how the city symbolizes ‘the evil’ that entices the youth and later destructs them. He also argues that Mwangi employs other styles like the use of dialogue, in the novel to show how characters are entangled in their difficult situations. The current research, however, focuses on how Mwangi’s use of style enhances his chronicling of African humanism in an urban environment. Besides, whereas Busolo holds that Mwangi is unable to persuade the audience to realize the source of the inequalities in their society, this study attempted to interrogate how Mwangi’s use of style in his urban trilogy articulates the representation of African humanism within the independent Kenyan context.

In another research on the setting of Meja Mwangi’s novels from a formalist perspective, Ezeugo (2014) declares that the effective setting of these works exposes Mwangi’s crucial manipulative use of devices and aesthetic vision. She further argues that Mwangi’s setting influences his characters and brings to view frustrated men and women that are influenced by the hard environment in which they operate, which negatively transforms them. Ezeugo also observes that critics such as Calder (1984) refer to Mwangi’s characters as the “Mwangian man and Mwangian” women because they are affected by hard and acrimonious milieu. Besides, she notes that Asika (2014) too responds to Mwangi’s setting and maintains that it assists the audience or readers to believe and sometimes anticipate the actions of the characters that are trapped in their environment. Although Ezeugo focused on the setting of Mwangi’s novels from a formalist approach to unravel the thematic concerns in Mwangi’s novels, this study adopted a Marxist perspective to examine how Mwangi’s trilogy depicts African humanism in postcolonial Kenya and by extension the wider African context.

## Methodology

### Results and Discussion

#### Symbolism in the Depiction of Humanism

When composing a literary piece an author articulates thematic concerns by use of stylistic devices. Among these devices is the use of symbolism that has featured in the trilogy. Being a form of expression, a symbol is a tangible object or image that represents an abstract idea or issue. Bell (2004) defines a symbol as something that is representative of another thing, and that symbols deepen a writer’s plot. Furthermore, the adherents of Marxism, such as Lukács, believe that a detailed analysis of symbols and

other literary devices would reveal class conflict and expose the direct relationship between the base and superstructure reflected in art (Habib, 2005). As such, different situations need varied analysis of the symbol. The symbols paid attention to in this sub-section are interpreted in relation to the issue of capitalism in a post-independent society evinced in the selected novels under study. In Mwangi's novels under study, *Kill Me Quick*, *Going Down River Road* and *The Cockroach Dances*, symbols have been utilized severally to convey the humane dispositions of characters.

The hope, expectations and dreams of most Kenyans, especially the youth, immediately after independence for jobs and better living are symbolically presented in Mwangi's trilogy. Kenyans were promised job opportunities and improved quality of life in the building of the nation by the new neo-colonial leaders (Kenyatta, 1968). However, since independence, the aspirations of Kenyans have not been adequately addressed. The masses still operate in poverty-stricken conditions in both urban and rural locale since economies reflect imperialist interests linked to dominant and rich privileged groups. Oppression and exploitation have continued to maim and mangle the lives of the underprivileged Kenyan folk. This has consequently impacted their human dignity and livelihoods. Most of these impoverished persons are suppressed by a capitalist and imperialist system that is pervaded by greed for wealth and privileged positions as compared with the poor masses, the underdogs (Odhiambo, 2008). Meja, Maina and Ocholla symbolize both rural and urban economically induced challenges faced by the Kenyan poor masses that contribute to the deterioration of their lives. These problems, for instance, involve extreme poverty caused by landlessness, famine, unemployment, fear and insecurity, a limited chance for climbing the social ladder.

When Meja and Maina arrive in the city, they become victims of destitution, alienation, exploitation and oppression all of which lead to their dehumanization and their eventual disfigurement. Meja and Maina are young Agikuyu boys from a rural African home as the names 'Meja' and 'Maina' names suggest. Presumably, they are the rural African cultured folk that has migrated to Nairobi city hopeful of the promised job opportunities. The duo lack the African gesture of warm greetings, provision of food and a place to shelter in the city from indifferent urban dwellers that are individually engrossed in their business and errands. Consequently, these youth end up eating from rubbish bins and sleeping in culverts of the open city streets. A situation that degrades and demeans their humanity and dignity for human life. Hence, signifying the African humanism spirit dwindling sense of African humanist spirit of 'neighbourliness' (Mbiti, 1991) among the poor segregated societal members that endure the pangs of deprivation endured by Kenyan poor masses. Therefore, this demonstrates the unbridgeable disparity between the 'haves' and 'have-nots,' a social challenge that cultivates fertile ground for the rot and erosion of the hitherto cherished African values of 'good neighbourhood' (Egbunu, 2014).

It is no wonder then that Meja and Maina are hurt by the selfishness, discrimination, unfriendliness and alienation evidenced in the city they have come to. It is an environment that is devoid of mutual human relations and concern for others regardless of their wealth status.

Furthermore, when the two boys move from one office to another in search of employment, they are trashed out inhumanely by being given unfair excuses based on 'job experiences as disclosed, "That is not a qualification,' the manager cut him short. Everybody has done and passed examinations. What I am asking for is experience" (Mwangi, 1973, p. 8). Indeed, this is a revelation of sheer frustration and alienation inflicted on poor jobless Kenyans. This protracted hostile relationship between the privileged elite and unemployed poor masses leads to alienation and person's demoralization,' rendering them devoid of a sense of humanity.

Similarly, Ocholla is a typical African Luo man, a migrant in Nairobi city who symbolizes abject poverty and deprivation that face most poor Kenyan families due to imbalanced distribution of economic resources. For example, Ocholla is eaten up by extreme poverty that he wallows in, an economic condition that has dehumanized and estranged him from his family since he gets mesmerized by their visit as the narrator reports:

Mother of...' Ocholla begins to swear and leaves the rest unsaid. His face turns grey hue, his eyes popping out...mouth hangs loose, exposing half-chewed sukuma wiki Ocholla's big nose starts working nervously...The expression on his face declares plainly he could murder the lot (Mwangi, 1976, p. 208).

From this episode, it is evident that Ocholla's life and that of his two wives and many children are symbolically the social misery and pain that the underclass endures especially urban dwellers that live 'from hand to mouth' (Kehinde, 2005, p. 243). This is a chain of alienation faced by city dwellers and their families back at home since neither of them escapes hunger and starvation. The state of impoverishment and disorganization that deprived families suffer contributes to the loss of human dignity and cultural values enhanced by suppressed dreams and hope symbolized by Ocholla. The poor therefore are kept at the bottom of the economic structure, alienated as 'have-nots.

Furthermore, the characters' names 'Ben,' 'Wini,' 'Onesmus' and 'Susan' among others are deliberately used contextually to refer to 'urbanite' individuals that have been westernized as their names imply. These urbanites are no longer tied to the African traditions and beliefs of the African village or family. Likewise, the writer symbolically employs 'urban-coined' names for his characters who include Dusman, Toto, Magendo, Sukuma Wiki, Bathroom Man, Chupa na Debe and Vuta Wiki to communicate alienation and deprivation of city poor inhabitants. Their 'birth roots' – ancestral origins – are untraceable to a rural African home like Meja, Maina and Ocholla are, as earlier explicated in this sub section. These are urban-based residents that form Nairobi's underclass that live in the shanty places along River Road and Grogan Road as disclosed by Dusman when giving personal information to the police:

'Name?' the duty constable asked Dusman.

Dusman Gonzaga,' Dusman told him...

'Home address?' the duty clerk repeated.

'Dacca House,' Dusman said...

'Dacca what?' he yelled...the constable banged the desk...hard...the station vibrated...The detective inspector had great self-control. 'What he wants,' he said to Dusman, 'is your home address in the country.'

'I live in Dacca House,' Dusman told him. 'I have no other

home.’... ‘Haven’t you guys ever heard of an urban African? I am one!’ (Mwangi, 1979, p. 336).

The personal details that Dusman openly gives the police duty clerk unravel how disconnected these urban dwellers are. Actually, they are the forgotten urban masses that symbolize urban problems of marginalization, shanty slum housing conditions, and the insufficient wages/income from petty jobs like casual labour. These are the urban men and women that are referred to as “the Mwangi man and woman” by Calder (1984). The lives of these isolated individuals indeed demonstrate how urbanization has disrupted the traditional African moral values of humanism due to ever-increasing poverty due to the imbalanced distribution of economic resources. In such an environment, the economically strangled persons are unable to relate humanely as they are in daily struggles to earn a living. Inevitably, this leads to low self-esteem among these masses, an attitude that denies them a sense of human dignity and the focus on the essence of human life.

The gradual erosion of the humane dispositions of the jobless city destitute is nauseating as symbolized by Ben. His personality drastically deteriorates when he loses his job, his only source of income and livelihood. He thus symbolizes the degenerating state of African humanism values in the ‘city-born’ inhabitants that undergo tormenting poverty and starvation. For instance, when Ben is dismissed consecutively from his place of work, he gets demoralized and falls into despair due to disillusionment and isolation as revealed, “he got drunk and thought. It would be impossible to get a job in the civil service. They would somehow find out his military service and fire him, maybe even imprison him” (Mwangi, 1976, p. 15). Ben is deeply hurt and this consequently lowers his self-esteem and a sense of being human in a society that favours few privileged elites in a capitalist society. In this regard, Ben is a symbol of the troubles of the unemployed poor destitute that roam the streets of the Kenyan urban centres to escape from the hostile socio-economic realities of their stratified environment. Ben’s woes are similar to that of the Kenyan milieu Mwangi realistically depicts (Ezeugo, 2014). Ben’s frustration and dehumanized state convey the hollowness and torture the ‘have-nots’ wallow in while the ‘haves’ unashamedly oppress them- the underemployed.

The character ‘Susan’ is a commercial sex worker at the tender age of sixteen- years due to the poverty and harsh socio-economic condition of the Majengo slum. She symbolizes the moral decadence that the impoverished city dwellers face as they engage in prostitution in order to afford basic needs like food. Susan has already had a baby and she is a slum dweller as she discloses to Ben during a dance at New Eden Nightclub as captured by the narrator: Poor kid, he thinks. She can’t be more than. ‘How old are you?’

‘Sixteen,’ without hesitation.

‘Where is your home?’...

‘I was born here.’...Not in Eden. In Majengo,’... (Mwangi, 1976, p. 143).

The young girl that Ben falls in love with after discovering that she has not been in commercial sex work for long like her fellow prostitutes as the narrator points out: “She is a beginner...neat, organized...she does not breathe beer into his face like the others...” (Mwangi, 1976, p. 142). Susan is in fact a victim of the oppression and exploitation that entangle the downtrodden masses in the urban space. Susan

is already a mother before she fully matures at eighteen years of age yet she is burdened by motherhood, a responsibility that pushes her into prostitution and loss of her moral character. The owner of the New Edens Night Club exploitatively lures these young people into prostitution to solicit income from this institution, yet this exploitation degrades the victims’ human dignity and essence. In an African setting human life, especially married life is sacred, since it is meant for fulfilment and procreation (Mbiti, 1991). Moreover, Susan engages in prostitution when her child is two months old thereby undermining her dignity. Indeed, this is symbolic of the rot of African humanism and moral values in a capitalist society where the underdogs have to struggle to get basic needs (Odhiambo, 2008).

Another female character, Wini, is a young woman that works as a secretary and a commercial sex worker that Mwangi symbolically uses as an embodiment of modernity and ‘an awakening’ for women to fight for change, and freedom from some of the barbaric ideologies that hold them captive. She boldly moves out of a relationship that she perceives as oppressive and exploitative. For instance, she has to take the responsibility of taking care of both Ben and Baby now that Ben solely depends on her. Indeed, Ben has been rendered helpless due to the unfair sacking from the army that is inconsiderate for the destiny of its retrenched officers exemplified by Ben. Indeed, this confirms the Marxism belief that society will always use ideology to keep the poor at the bottom of the structure without them realizing it (Habib, 2005). Wini actually conquers the beliefs that women are custodians of homes, to be entirely housekeepers and dissociate themselves from academic advancement matters among others. From what Ben reveals of her, Wini is liberal, industrious, organized and ready to take risks, besides being lovable as Ben discloses, “Ben’s heart glowed. All that good morning beauty, all the sweetness in it belonged to him. His to keep” (Mwangi, 1976, p. 5). However, this is short-lived as Wini makes an unfamiliar and bold gesture to desert this cherished and humane love relationship with her new-formed nuclear family and opts to establish a love relationship with a higher income earner – her office boss, Mr. Caldwell for financial security, a redemption from poverty, a capitalistic drive. Indeed, these are the economic challenges that are contributing to the breakage of family relationships, weakening the principles of African humanism in a capitalist society.

Like Susan, Onesmus is briefly paid attention to by the narrator, symbolically as a paragon of evil and malice in society. Onesmus is a former workmate of Ben in the army that has also suffered dismissal that had been contributed to by Ben. This then becomes the cause for their endless enmity. Besides, the portrayal of the hatred between Ocholla and Ben at the Development House construction site, instances of dehumanization are uncovered. Firstly, by focusing on Onesmus, the narrator reveals the inhumane relationships the workers of this building are subjected to. Evidently, when Onesmus is crushed by the crane, one of the casual workers – ‘a weathered hand’ inhumanely refers to the deceased as an object, ‘the fucker is dead, he informs the foreman” (Mwangi, 1976, p. 170). Secondly, the death of Onesmus does not concern the cold-blooded capitalist who owns the building, he quickly calls for calmness to resume as disclosed, “Work resumes, slowly at first, and

then wobbling to average speed to two hot hours later” (p. 171). This instils fear in Ben, hence his desire to get his enemy eliminated. Ocholla secretly plans and lets the crane fall and crushes Onesmus to death as he reveals accidentally to Ben, “I don’t know why I did it. It was madness...Ben.’ Good madness,’ Ben tells him” (Mwangi, 1976, p. 174). Basing on these vices revolving around Onesmus, Mwangi unravels what Gakandi (1986) terms as the depiction of life as it impacts workers in a milieu, for the sake of social reform. This accordingly exposes how poverty, oppression and exploitation lead to repressed anger that is expressed through violence, thereby exposing the weakening of persons’ humane dispositions.

The words ‘Kill me quick’ for the title of the novel echo the cry of a person groaning in pain, abandonment due to the pain and torture the victim’s life is threatened. In this regard, the affected persons readily accept their imminent fate – death. This is an indication that they feel scared, hopeless and objectified. This indicates the silent condition to which poverty affected these victims who wish for death instead. This is further reinforced in the text by use of the introductory poem that stresses and foregrounds these words, KILL ME QUICK at the beginning of the novel. This despair and loss of hope is caused by failed promises of independence as most of the youth suffer situations of homelessness, loneliness, abandonment, starvation, diminished self-esteem, among others. To explicate, after independence, Kenyans were promised employment for the youth, better living standards and better delivery services (Gakuru, 2002). Nonetheless, these promises and expectations have continued to be unfulfilled and thwarted, hence, the escalating socioeconomic rot in neo-colonial Kenya.

Literally, the fiction narrates increased crime among the youth in society whereas these words ‘Kill me quick,’ bitterly symbolize disillusionment, dehumanization and groans of the poor masses that are forgotten in the ‘backstreets’ of society—a ceaseless struggle to meet their daily basic needs. This is because the available wealth is concentrated in the hands of the aristocrats and the elite that operate from the rich suburbs of society as they exclude the poor disguisedly in the words, “NO VACANCY. HAKUNA KAZI HAPA” (Mwangi, 1973, p. 6). This in fact communicates a society that is barricaded by classes of the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ This then begs the question: are the values and beliefs of the past African society that upheld communalism and welfare of societal members still guiding society? Obviously, the answer is disheartening because crude individualism and dehumanization have taken a toll in a post-independent society. This means that exploitation, oppression, alienation, corruption and nepotism among others are the weapons of governance in postcolonial Africa, represented by the Kenyan community. Inevitably, the title ‘kill me quick’ epitomizes this class disparity and the repercussion it has on societal members’ human nature.

Similarly, Mwangi has used symbolism to portray the rot of humanness in modern Kenyan society. Some aristocrats possess the power and are in charge of the laws that govern the nation today in their favour, while these rules are made in such a way that they disadvantage the poor and less fortunate citizens. To begin with, Tumbo Kubwa, through dubious means solicits rent from his poorly housed tenants to enrich himself dictatorially. He is depicted symbolically

as a ruthless, tyrannical, and inhumane landlord who assumes the horrible living conditions of his Dacca House and continues to force the victims to pay rent. On the other hand, the masses symbolized by the tenants are already indoctrinated by the ideology that the governing authority is never questioned, and theirs is only to obey the rule of law, a practice that renders them naïve, suppressed, with a feeling of low self-esteem. This is a dehumanizing practice that denies them their right to resist injustice and lack of human rights (Kula, 2017). Awitor (2013) also points out that Tumbo is blind to the genuine claims that Dusman makes. In this respect, Dusman symbolizes a voice of justice and he is the epitome of reason in a capitalistic society that is choking the already impoverished Kenyans, especially the urban slum dwellers that are exploited by exaggerated house rent. This further reveals the heartlessness of the rich to the pleas of the poor as demonstrated by the cries of Dacca House tenants under the aristocracy of Tumbo – the privileged few rich persons. This thus suggests the collapsing trend of cultural values and norms that like ‘cement,’ hitherto helped hold mutual relationships and interactions in authentic social set up.

The use of Tumbo and Dusman as symbols further enables Mwangi to graphically capture the gap between the rich and the impoverished ones as portrayed in this novel. This is a reflection of the daily order of happenings in the postcolonial Kenyan situation (Kresse, 2016). Tumbo is an epitome of a capitalist, neo-colonial Kenya, whereas Dusman represents the struggle that is witnessed between the dominant power-oriented class of politicians and the common people. Realistically, *The Cockroach Dance* is a narration and a chronicling of neo-colonialism, which is at the verge and pinnacle of destroying the African, particularly Kenyan traditional values, hence the decline of virtues that solidify a cohesive and sound humane society. Arguably, this is a revelation that the African cultural values no longer govern society, but instead, it is the ideology of the dominant ruling class—the bourgeoisie, that determines the power relations, and type of life in such an environment. Moreover, this unravels the socio-economic injustice to which the masses are subjected.

In Mwangi’s trilogy, cockroaches are employed conventionally to symbolize a harsh environment that is marked by perpetual poverty, unfeeling and exploitative bourgeoisie and leaders that are insensitive to the challenges faced by the majority of persons. The cockroaches are centred on as being stubborn and are everywhere as recounted:

The unmade bed was uncomfortable to Dusman’s back. He got up to make it and flushed a couple of “mating roaches” from under the pillow. Dacca House cockroaches did everything except get out and go away for good. They ate raw food, drank three days old milk, slept in his reeking shoes and now this wagging dance in his bed. He would not be surprised at all if he found them smoking his cigarettes (Mwangi, 1979, p. 15).

These personified household cockroaches certainly symbolize what plagues a post-independent nation that is capitalistic by orientation. The unmade bed too reveals the confusion and chaotic situation most poor slum city dwellers find themselves in due to stinging economic conditions. The roaches are capable of doing anything evil to Dusman meaning that the exploitative profit makers the capitalists are set to destroy the powerless, underclass that

is subjected to unending poverty and hard living conditions. The poor struggle against an absurd society in which concern for one another is an issue of the past. The domineering roaches signify what troubles postcolonial nation, an image of contemporary Kenya that is experiencing problems of corruption, nepotism, poverty, social divisions, among others.

The Car that belongs to Dusman's is an archetypal symbol, a 'vehicle motif' that Mwangi employs to show the depreciation and deflation of the humane temperament of persons exposed to tormenting and dehumanizing circumstances. When Dusman stops working at Sunshine Hotel, it is disclosed that he has bought a second-hand car from his boss, whitehead expensively and he moves with it to Dacca House. This then makes the difference between Dusman and the rest of the tenants such as the faceless ones – the ordinary people that own nothing, apart from their daily struggles to have what to eat. For Dusman, the vehicle symbolizes the hope of social mobility, an assurance of getting out of Dacca House to a better place like the suburbs where those of the upper class in society live. The car is given the pronoun "she" for female, an indication that the car gives some companionship to him: 'Dusman had clung to his car. She was his whole past...she reflected the respectable side of his life's achievements...What Dacca House took out of his personality, the car gave back' (Mwangi, 1979, p. 8). However, the car's parts are stolen at intervals a revelation of how poverty plays a role in undermining an individual's sense of dignity and respect and a decline of one's moral value and human relationships. His attachment to the vehicle is intense because when thieves on Grogan Road steal its parts, Dusman becomes disoriented as he forgets to dress properly and is reminded to do it correctly, 'You got your shirt inside out,' ... 'You got your slippers on the wrong feet too'... 'he changed them around' (Mwangi, 1979, p. 13). When an environment becomes too hostile, individuals are consoled by their possessions, which add to their worth and consolation. As such, Dusman's car serves as his consolation, family and friend that fill up his loneliness and impoverished state. This is a hollowness and emptiness that is affected by his highly capitalistic society that is demoralizing, alienating, exploitative and selfish to the poor such as Dusman and the poor of Dacca House.

The Bathroom Man's mentally handicapped is a contextual symbol that exemplifies the failed promises of independence to the youth and the unemployed. After independence, particularly in Kenya, the former president Kenyatta (1968) promised Kenya fruits of independence as brought out in his *Suffering without Bitterness* in this statement: "...today, we start on the great adventure of building of the Kenyan nation" (p. 212). The black colonial masters have instead become colonialists, aristocrats, greedy and egocentric. The poor, especially the youthful school leavers, languish in disillusionment, and their talents are neglected, thus 'handicapped.' This is because the responsible governing system has turned a deaf ear on the unemployed due to corruption, nepotism and lack of responsibility. There is class conflict and struggle since there is little tangible that has happened after independence, and economies are pervaded by the interests of capitalist supremacy that is linked to the dominant classes.

The mentally retarded child is also unnoticeable to residents of Dacca House, but Dusman learns later that the

child is a baby boy as the story ends. At the beginning of the novel, the condition of this child is disclosed: "The child could not talk, walk or play, and, even though the eyes were always open and moving in an apparent determined attempt to understand, it was doubtful if anything...registered in its soft brain (Mwangi, 1979, p. 1). The helplessness of the child epitomizes the economically suppressed and strangled poor that are gripped by injustice, social inequality and unfairness. These masses are unable to improve their lives and chances of making upward mobility are uncertain since they are victims of underemployment, inadequate housing, class hate and rejection. They helplessly watch the rich accumulate surplus profit whereas they struggle to live in a class-polarized environment. As such, each individual lives in isolation and this contributes to the loss of their moral value and cultural principles that help promote human dignity and cohesive society.

### Conclusion

In his trilogy, Meja Mwangi has vividly articulated the representation of humanism by employing symbolism, irony, contrast, epistolary technique and vivid description. The manipulation of such devices has enabled Mwangi to unravel the weakening of the 'value-laden African humanism' in post-independent Kenya and Africa at large. These devices have been discussed in-depth to show how their employment in the trilogy helps communicate the issue of capitalism and its influence on societal stratification, exploitation, oppression and alienation. Mwangi's effective use of style has further exposed how the rich exploit the poor, and how the poor struggle to survive in a capitalistic nation like Kenya that is marred by economic constraints, crude individualism, and overwhelming poverty of the common man – the masses. The disparity between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' in a capitalist society contributes to the collapse of the African principles of humanism that help 'cement' healthy human relationships, which help build a cohesive community with a communal voice that focuses on caring and compassion.

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